

**Bob Herbert**  
**NCAS/UC Commencement Speech – May 18, 2006**

Let Me Say First How Happy And Honored I Am To Be Here On This Very Special Day.

I'd Like To Thank Doctor McCormick, Doctor Diner, Doctor Kirby... And The Board Of Governors Of Your Great University For Doing Me The Tremendous Honor And Great Kindness Of Awarding Me This Honorary Degree.

I Know You're Excited, For Obvious Reasons. But I'm Pretty Excited, Too. Receiving This Degree Really Makes Me Feel That I Am Personally A Part Of This Wonderful Commencement, Part Of The Class Of 2006.

It Makes Me Feel That I Am With You.

Perhaps This Will Be A New Beginning For Me As Well.

I Offer My Warmest Congratulations To All Of You Who Have Worked So Hard And Have Now Seen Your Efforts Culminate In Your Degree From This Fine University.

And Congratulations Also To The Parents, Grandparents, Brothers And Sisters And Other Relatives Who Are Here Today. I Know You're As Proud Of The Graduates As You Can Be.

I Grew Up In Montclair And My First Newspaper Job Was At The Star-Ledger In Newark. So Even Though I've Lived In New York For A Long Time, I Still I Feel Pretty Much At Home Right Here.

But A Lot Of Things Have Changed Since I Was Of High School And College Age.

I Mean You've Got Your Music, For Example, And We Had Ours. We Had Groups With Names Like The Temptations And The Supremes And The Crystals. You've Got This Fellow – What's His Name, Half A Buck?

No, No, No -- I Know. It's Fitty Cent.

I Was Warned Not To Mis-Pronounce His Name. One Of My Younger Friends Said, Bob, Don't Say Fif-Ty Cents. They'll Laugh At You. It's Fitty Cent.

(My Wife And I Were In Cancun Last Year And We Saw This Enormous Billboard With This Young Fellow On It. And It Said Fitty Cent. I Thought It Was The Admission Price.)

There Are Other Interesting Names Out There. Ludicrous, For Example. Can You Imagine Naming Yourself Ludicrous?

And There's A Group Called Forty Glock. Which I Guess Is Named After A Gun.

And One Of My Favorites: Missy Misdemeanor Elliott.

That's A Good One.

Sometimes These Names Pose A Problem For Me As A Columnist At The New York Times. Because We Use Mister Or Miz In Second References. So If I Use Fitty Cent In A Column, What Do I Write In The Next Reference? Mr. Fitty? Mr. Cent?

I Don't Even Know If Missy Misdemeanor Elliott Is A Man Or A Woman. Would I Say Ms. Missy? Mister Misdemeanor.

It Can Get A Little Crazy.

I Thought I Might Compare Some Of The Lyrics From The 1960s To The Lyrics Of Today. So I Had My Assistant Pull Some Of The Current Lyrics.

Well! I Looked At Them And I Said, Oh No, I Won't Be Able To Say Any Of That In A Commencement Speech.

So Times Have Changed.

But In A Lot Of Ways, Times Haven't Changed.

I'd Like To Tell You A Little Story About Myself And A Group Of My Friends.

I Was About 19 Or 20 Years Old At The Time. I Wrote A Column About This In The Times And I Thought It Would Be Appropriate To Talk About It Here.

So Here Goes:

Paul Conover And I Met Michael Farmer During Basic Training At Fort Dix, New Jersey, In The Mid-1960s.

Conover And I Were Friends From Montclair. Farmer Was A Kid From Atlantic City, A Seventeen-Year-Old Who Mumbled So Badly You Could Never Be Sure What He Was Saying.

He Was Big And Good-Looking, But The First Impression Was That He Wasn't Too Swift.

One Night Farmer Came Over To Our Barracks – Uninvited – While Conover And I, Who Were A Couple Of Years Older And Light Years Cooler (At Least We Thought We Were Cool) Were Sitting On The Floor, Spit-Shining Our Combat Boots.

Very Tentatively And Very Politely Farmer Asked If He Could Join Us.

I Told Him To Get Lost. Farmer Must Not Have Understood Because He Promptly Sat Down, Took Off His Boots, And, Over The Next Few Minutes, Proved To My Satisfaction That He Was As Dumb As He Sounded.

First He Told Us That He Had *Joined* The Army. Conover Grinned And Rolled His Eyes. Then Farmer Said He Was In Love With A Girl In Atlantic City And Planned To Marry Her. I Shook My Head.

This Was Not A Person Worth Spending Time With. As A Draftee, All I Wanted Was For My Hair To Grow Back And To Be Reunited With That Gleaming Symbol Of Freedom And The Good Life – My Thunderbird.

But Conover Liked Farmer And Told Him To Come Back The Next Night.

“He Mumbles,” I Said.

But Conover Said, “Ah, He's All Right.”

So Farmer Came Back, Night After Night, To Smoke Cigarettes, Listen To Motown Music, Mumble About His Girlfriend, And Polish Boots.

To My Chagrin, I Started To Like Him, Though I Still Needed A Translator To Understand Him. For The Longest Time I Thought His Girlfriend's Name Was Merlin. It Was Marilyn.

Farmer And Conover Became Very Close. Eventually Both Of Them Were Sent To Vietnam. I Got Lucky And Was Sent To Korea, Which Was No Walk In The Park. But It Wasn't Vietnam.

The Impact Of The War On Conover And Farmer Was Strange. When Farmer Came Back, He Seemed More Sure Of Himself, More Open And Fun-Loving, Less Insecure. He And Marilyn Were Married.

Conover, The Most Happy-Go-Lucky Guy I Had Ever Known, Was A Wreck. He Was Nervous. Jumpy. Some Nights He Would Drink Like A Fish.

The Cheerful Optimism That Had Once Defined His Personality Was Gone.

He Wouldn't Really Talk About Vietnam. All I Ever Heard Him Say Was, "I Didn't Know I Could Get So Scared."

Then The Unthinkable Happened. Farmer, Who Had Enlisted For Four Years And Was Still In The Service, Got Orders To Go Back To Vietnam.

We Told Him Not To Go. Call Your Congressman, We Said. Fight This Thing. But Farmer Didn't Know How.

It's Not Hard To Guess What Happened. Farmer's Second Tour Lasted Only A Few Months. I Was In The Back Of My Father's Upholstery Shop One Afternoon When Conover Walked In.

"Farmer Didn't Make It," He Said. And Then He Started Crying.

A Year Passed. I Got A Job With A Newspaper. Conover Got Married. Other Buddies Got Killed In The War, Which Began To Look Like It Might Go On Forever. My Sister's Boyfriend Got Shot.

I Didn't Realize It, But Conover's Struggle Was Winding Down. He Wouldn't Make It, Either.

I Never Got The Story Straight. All I Know Is That He Got His Hands On A Gun, And One Night He Waited In A Car Outside His House For His Wife To Come Home.

When She Showed Up, He Shot Her Dead. Then He Killed Himself.

I Can't Think About The Vietnam War Without Thinking Of My Two Buddies, Farmer And Conover. Neither Had A Clue About The Politics Or The History Or The Egos That Sucked Them Up Like Dust From A Carpet And Consigned Them To Their Pointless Fates.

Vietnam Was A Fool's Errand And The Young And The Ignorant Went To Their Doom By The Tens Of Thousands.

Now, More Than Three Decades After The End Of The War In Vietnam, We're Locked In Yet Another Senseless, Unnecessary War – This Time In Iraq.

And This Time It's Another Generation Of Young Men And Women – Your Generation – That Is Providing The Warm Bodies That Are Being Fed Into The Relentless And Often Fatal Pressure Cooker Of Combat.

And It's Members Of Your Generation Who Are Coming Back In Body Bags, Or Paralyzed, Or Missing Their Arms, Or Their Legs, Or Their Eyesight Or Their Hearing.

And I Know From Talking To So Many Of The Veterans Who Have Come Back From Iraq That These Young Kids Don't Know Any More About The Politics Or The History Or The Egos That Resulted In Them Being Sent Off To War Than My Friends Farmer Or Conover Did Back In The 1960s.

Worse Than That, The Leaders Of Our Country Haven't Learned Enough From Our Previous Mistakes To Keep Us Out Of These Wars That Benefit No One, And Cause So Much Agonizing Grief To So Many.

[Pause]

When You Don't Learn From Your Mistakes, You Remain In A State Of Ignorance. And One Of The Points I'd Like To Make Here Today Is That Ignorance Can Be Just As Destructive As A Bullet Or A Bomb.

As Individuals And As A Nation, We Have To Learn From The Mistakes Of The Past.

We've Got To Be Smarter About The Way We Live Our Lives And The Way We Craft Our Society.

Just As Our Government Leaders Should Have Learned From Vietnam To Avoid The Tremendous Tragedy Of An Unnecessary War, We As Individuals Have To Learn From Our Mistakes And From The Mistakes That Others Have Made In Their Personal Lives.

We All Know Of People Who Lost Their Lives To Drugs, To Violence, To Unsafe Personal Behavior. People In My Family Have Died From Smoking Cigarettes. We Know What Can Happen To Children Who Grow Up Without Loving Parents.

We Have To Be Smart Enough To Learn The Proper Lessons From The Experiences Of Others, And Adjust Our Experiences Accordingly.

As John Kennedy Said So Many Years Ago, We Can Do Better.

As A Newsman, I Look Around And I See So Many Areas Where We Haven't Learned The Lessons Of The Past. Some Of This Has To Do With Personal Behavior And Some Of It Is About Societal Behavior.

I See The Violence In The Streets, Especially In The Big Cities, That Takes So Many Young And Promising Lives.

I See The Teenagers Who Drop Out Of School And Wander The Streets Without Jobs, Hustling And Doing Whatever To Support Themselves From Day To Day. I See Guns And Drugs Virtually Everywhere – Not Just In Big Cities, But In The Suburbs, And In Rural America, Too.

I See A Movement On The Right To Crack Down On The Immigrants Who Have Brought So Much Energy And Contributed So Much To The Good Things In This Society.

I See A Country That Spends So Much Of Its Money On Armaments And War While Refusing To Deal With Such Critical Problems As Health Care And Homelessness And The Lousy Condition Of The Public Schools In So Many Parts Of This Country.

There's Something Very Wrong, For Example, With A Society That Makes It Difficult To Buy The Morning-After Pill But Easy To Buy A Gun.

Our Society Is In Trouble. And I'm Telling You Today, Nearly Half A Century After J.F.K. Told Us That We *Can* Do Better – I'm Telling You That We *Have* To Do Better

Now I Know You've Got People To Meet This Afternoon And Parties To Go To Tonight And Some Celebrating To Do. But Tomorrow Or The Next Day Or The Day After That, I'd Like You To Give Some Serious Thought To The Kind Of Lives *You* Want To Live And The Kind Of Society You Want To Live In.

Now I'm Sure You Want Great Jobs And Fine Homes And Fantastic Children, And Some Of You May Even Want To Become Rich And Famous.

Well, Just Like It Took A Big Effort And Some Significant Sacrifices To Get Your Degree, It Will Take A Big Effort, A Lot Of Hard Work, And Many More Sacrifices To Lead A Good Life And Create A Better World For Your Children.

It Won't Come Easy. My Advice To You Today Is Not At All Complicated. I'll Just Sum It Up By Saying:

Dream Big And Work Hard.

You'll Find One Day That If You Make That Big Effort, If You Make Those Sacrifices, If You Work Really Hard, It Will Have Been Worth It.

You'll Wake Up One Fine Morning In A Fantastic Apartment In The City, Or A Lovely Home In The Burbs, Or On A Ranch Out West, Or In A Diplomatic Post In Africa, Or On A Yacht In The Mediterranean (Trust Me, All Of This Is Possible) – And You'll Be With Your Children Maybe, And With The Person You Love By Your Side – And You'll Breathe In That Morning Air, Clean And Healthy And Free Of Toxins, And You'll Be Really Happy That You Worked As Hard As You Did, And Made The Choices You Made.

Good Things Can Happen To Good People. But You Have To Work Really Hard At It.

You've Taken An All-Important First Step By Getting A Degree. But A Degree By Itself Is Not Enough.

You Are Not A Better Person Because You Have A College Degree. How You Use The Knowledge That That Degree Represents Will Determine Whether You Are A Better Person, And Whether You Will Contribute To The Creation Of A Better Society.

I Know That Great Things Are Possible Because So Many Great Things Have Occurred Just In The Course Of My Lifetime.

I Was The First Of The Baby-Boomers, Born At The End Of World War Ii. It Was A Time When It Seemed Like The Entire World Had To Be Rebuilt.

Men And Women Of Fierce Intelligence And With Tremendous Creative Drive Set About Doing Just That.

It Was An Important Time, That Immediate Post-War Period. It Was A Time When The Nation Believed In Itself, And Believed That Great Things Were Possible.

By Leading The Effort To Create The United Nations, The United States Led The Way In The Quest For World Peace. And We Developed The Marshall Plan To Rebuild Western Europe.

Here At Home We Built Schools And Housing And Highways And Established A Standard Of Living That Was The Envy Of The Entire World.

But The People Who Were Young And Smart In Those Days, Just Like You Are Here Today, Did A Lot More Than That.

Over The Years, They Fought Hard And Made Big Advances In Civil Rights And Women's Rights And Gay Rights And Civil Liberties.

Some Of Them Committed Themselves To Protecting The Rights Of Workers And Consumers, And Even The Criminally Accused. Some Made The Environment A Priority.

Many Of The Most Important People In Those Efforts Were Young Men And Women Just Like Yourselves. They Did Great Things.

Now It's Your Turn.

In The Past Several Years, In My View, We've Gone Backwards As A Nation, And Much Of The Promise Of That Post-World War II Era Has Been Lost.

Now You're Confronted With A World Filled To The Brim With Enormous Problems.

Those Problems Are Your Opportunities. And Yours Is The Generation That Will Be Providing Us Some Of The Earliest Leaders Of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

I Can't Think Of Anything That Is Much More Exciting Than That.

The Way You Live Your Individual Lives – And The Manner In Which You Participate In The Events, Big And Small, Of Your Time – Will Determine Whether Your Home, Your Neighborhood, Your Country And Your World Will Be Places That Nurture, Sustain And Elevate Life, Or Places That Degrade And Destroy It.

You Are Helping To Create A New World, For Better Or Worse, With Each Act That You Engage In And Each Life Decision You Make. It Makes A Difference Whether Or Not You Smoke A Cigarette Or Give Your Baby A Hug Or Decide To Get Up An Hour Earlier Before Work In Order To Vote.

Think Carefully About Your Options And Choices, And Make A Difference That Is Positive And Constructive For You And The Rest Of Your Society.

Dream *Big*. Work Hard

This Is Your World. These Are Your Times.

It's *Your* Generation That Is Breaking Like A New Dawn In The Eastern Sky Of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How You Respond To This Awesome And Fantastic Opportunity Is Up To You.

So Have Fun. Be Serious. Be Good. And Be Well.

Congratulations, Class Of 2006, And I Wish The Very Best Of Luck To All Of You.