

Kalamazoo College Commencement Speech
June 13, 2010
by Senator Carl Levin

Sandy [Lipse], thanks so much for that kind introduction. To the leadership of Kalamazoo College, thank you so much for the honor of this degree, and thank you for all you have done for our state, our nation, and for the students gathered here today. It's great to be with you today and to be here with my wife, Barbara.

To the K College Class of 2010, my heartiest congratulations. You did it. Take a moment, consider what you've done, and consider all the people who have helped you get here.

You have worked hard, it's true, but keep in mind also your incredible good fortune. The opportunity to study here is an exceptional gift. This college was here before Michigan was here – founded four years before our state was admitted to the Union. You are the beneficiaries of that long, proud history, the latest in a line of gifted Hornet graduates.

K College has embedded in you the value of a good book, and the power of a good idea. It has taught you to think critically, and to examine your own opinions with the same rigor you apply to the opinions of others. Your remarkable study-abroad program has shown you a world beyond this campus and beyond our shores – a world worth exploring and understanding. The comprehensive strategy of the K Plan has combined the practical and the high-minded, the value of preparing for your own future and the need to improve the lives of those around you.

You've learned other lessons, lessons that seem less weighty, perhaps, but will also come in handy. You now know that sometimes the only solution to a tough problem is a doughnut from Sweetwater's. And you have learned the value of an unplanned day at a Lake Michigan beach.

The commencement address tradition calls for the speaker to share one or two life experiences. I'm going to cheat a little. I'm going to enlist the help of another politician, one who also delivered a speech here in Kalamazoo. This speaker out-ranked me – he was, in fact, president of the United States. No, no. Not President Obama. I'm talking about another president from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln's only speech in Michigan of which we have a record was delivered about a mile from here, in Bronson Park, in 1856, four years before Michigan helped elect him president. He was campaigning for John Fremont, the Republican presidential candidate that year. Lincoln is a remarkable teacher. A new college graduate could do far worse than to model a life and career after that of the 16th president, although he not only didn't graduate from college, he had hardly any formal education at all. Here we have a man raised on the frontier, given only the barest of schooling, who had to walk for miles just to grab hold of a new book. Yet his thirst for learning was unquenchable. Imagine what Lincoln would think of our world, in which nearly all human kind's store of knowledge is just a few keyboard clicks away.

Lincoln's Kalamazoo address is a fascinating speech, and not just because it was delivered nearby. When we think of Lincoln, we think of the soaring rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address or

his Second Inaugural – “Four score and seven years ago” and “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” That wasn’t the Lincoln who spoke here in Kalamazoo on the hot August afternoon 154 years ago when he talked to a fired-up group of supporters.

The central question of the day was whether slavery should be extended into new territories. Supporters of slavery wanted to extend it into Kansas and Nebraska as they became new states. The candidate of Lincoln’s party sought to keep the stain of slavery from spreading.

In Kalamazoo, Lincoln made the moral case against slavery, though speaking to a staunchly anti-slavery crowd, he knew his audience needed little convincing that slavery was evil. But Lincoln focused at length on how the moral imperative to oppose slavery was aligned not just with his audience’s conscience, but with their own self interest – how the extension of slavery would be an injustice not only to African-American slaves, but also to the white male voters of Michigan.

How so? Because of the Constitution’s treatment of slavery. Slave states not only benefitted unjustly from the labor of their slaves, but they gained political power from owning them as well. Slaves were, of course, treated as property, deprived of all rights, including the right to vote. But in the census every 10 years that determined how many seats each state had in the House of Representatives, the Constitution provided that each slave counted as three-fifths of a person.

That formula put the voters of non-slave states at a real disadvantage. Maine and South Carolina, Lincoln pointed out to his listeners, had nearly equal voting populations, yet South Carolina had twice as many seats in the House of Representatives in Washington. Lincoln told the Kalamazoo crowd that day: “It is a fact that any man in South Carolina has more influence and power in Congress today than any two [men here in Michigan].” He made a direct appeal to the self-interest of Michigan’s white population. Extending slavery into new states would have added to that political injustice, Lincoln argued. So, he attacked slavery not only because it enslaved blacks in the south, but because it discriminated against white men in Michigan!

Lincoln’s speech didn’t ignore the moral case against slavery – he called it a “demon” over which the nation must triumph. But it was the pragmatic, practical arguments that took up most of his remarks. Lincoln didn’t just preach to the people of Kalamazoo – he appealed to their interests as well as to their values. And I think there’s a lesson in that for all of us.

We want others to see the world as we see it, to see as right and true and moral what we see as right and true and moral. Lincoln knew that people are motivated by conscience, but also by interests – by self-interests – and that if we can show them that their conscience and their self-interests are in sync, we can more easily persuade them. Some might see this as cynical, but I think that gives humanity too little credit. People, in 1856 and today, want to do the right thing, and they want to stick up for their family, or their business, or their state. Trying to make those two goals consistent is a very human, and a very humane, endeavor.

The most valuable lesson Lincoln taught us is that the most valuable tool we possess is our own moral compass.

Lincoln's remained fixed – to the obvious discomfort of his strongly anti-slavery audience that day in Kalamazoo – on preserving the union at all costs. As he wrote early in his presidency: “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.” Lincoln believed that America's gift to the world was its ongoing experiment in democracy, and that to allow the union to crumble was to squander that precious gift, something he was unwilling to do, even if others in his party would have sacrificed the union rather than remain in a nation stained by slavery.

It's also true that as his presidency progressed, the question of slavery itself more and more came to dominate Lincoln's thinking. The moral evil of slavery became almost inseparable in his writings from the danger of destroying the union. Preserving the union and abolishing slavery became one and the same cause. Lincoln lost his life to a fanatic who hated him because of his dedication to that cause. Yet dedication to a great cause is an example we should all strive to follow.

I got a reminder of that in the mail not long ago. It was a letter from the mother of a Marine who was killed in Afghanistan. This young man from Michigan was serving his second combat tour, leaving a young wife at home while he served his nation. His mother wrote to me: “We, as parents, are not supposed to bury our sons and daughters.” Yet she was proud that her son had died in the service of something bigger than himself, something he believed in strongly –his country, and the freedom of a nation not his own. She sent me a few photographs – a haunting photo of her Marine son in his desert fatigues, along with photos of scores of people who lined the route as his body was returned home to Michigan, people standing in the falling snow to wave American flags and messages of support.

You graduate today and enter a world in which many young men and women willingly make such sacrifices. You will be called upon to make sacrifices of your own – not so dear, I hope, but sacrifices nonetheless. For all the progress we've made since Lincoln's time, the need for service, for sacrifice, is still with us – it will likely always be with us. I hope when your cap and gown have been laid aside and you have embarked upon your new lives, that you will look for ways to serve your community, your nation, your planet. The teachers, parents and mentors gathered here today, and the college that now proudly calls you alumni, have given much to bring you to this point. Repay those gifts with a lifetime of doing the extraordinary. Give back to the community that has given you so much.

You can never go too far wrong by supporting the people who have sacrificed on your behalf, or when you defend and advance the principles of the nation that has been and remains mankind's best hope. But I also hope you'll keep in mind, in the face of all those great responsibilities, that there's a time to head for the beach.

Thank you for inviting me to share this day with you. Congratulations. And the best of luck to the Class of 2010.

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