

FYI — Summer 2006 Dean's Letter

You may remember your graduation ceremony at Lincoln Center, or next to the Law School on Revson Plaza, or at other venues. This year, for the first time, we staged an impressive ceremony on South Field of Columbia's Morningside Heights campus. The festivities honored Professor Zohar Goshen with the Willis L.M. Reese Teaching Prize and featured New York Governor George E. Pataki '70. I thought you might be interested in the speech I gave to our new graduates:

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Congratulations. Today is a day you will always remember, and I would like these remarks to be just as memorable. So the other day, I had a flash of inspiration. I don't have to say a word. Instead, I just have to hold my breath for nine minutes while floating in a giant glass bubble. Unfortunately, the bubble is not available, so the best I can do is to speak for less than nine minutes.

A reason to be brief is that I am the opening act for our main speaker, Governor George Pataki, Class of 1970. Since we have the Governor with us, I'd like to talk to you about two other Governors of New York who studied at Columbia Law School, Theodore Roosevelt, and his cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You will notice that both of them went on to another job. Governor, there may be a pattern here.

I want to take you back 100 years. In 1906, Teddy Roosevelt was serving as President, while Franklin was here at the law school, enrolled in the Class of 1907. But Franklin decided to leave the law school without graduating, something Teddy had done as well. Notice, then, that all of you have something that Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt did not: a degree from this great law school.

Now, you may think there is little to be gained in comparing you to the Roosevelts. After all, the Roosevelts were so stunningly accomplished. Teddy won the Nobel Peace Prize, while FDR navigated the country through the Great Depression and World War II (and eventually became a highway on Manhattan's East Side). But the truth is, there is a good chance we have a future head of state in the Class of 2006, along with CEOs, academics, judges, ambassadors, general counsels, and other leaders. There really are no limits to what you can achieve.

This is not to say that your lives will always be easy. Even the most successful people struggle sometimes. I'm sure you know that Franklin Roosevelt lost the use of his legs to polio. Did you know that Teddy Roosevelt suffered from severe childhood asthma? He lost his father before his 21st birthday. A few years later, his wife and his mother both died on the same day, a blow so traumatic that he never spoke of either of them again.

I hope none of you will face tragedies of this magnitude, but you will face your share of difficulties. In this increasingly competitive world, your jobs will consume a great deal of your time and energy. You have loans to pay, and your rents and mortgage payments will be high. You will constantly struggle to balance your work and personal lives. It will be tempting to short-change the people you love – to miss birthday parties and anniversaries, to forget to return calls, to cancel at the last minute – because you can count on loved ones to understand. Indeed, you have leaned hard on the people you love in order to get through the past three years, and we should take this opportunity to thank them now. But be careful about asking too much, for too long, because even the strongest relationships can be strained. It takes energy, patience, and understanding to be a true friend, a loving spouse, and a dedicated parent. At the end of the day, nothing is more important, but that does not make it easy.

Even so, you can take comfort in the fact that, professionally, there is no single path to success. There are many ways to excel. Remember that Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt did not spend their careers at a law firm, so, if that's not what you love, find something else. You should also be prepared for setbacks. Did you know that Teddy Roosevelt failed as a rancher? It's a good thing too, because he learned that what he really loved was public life. The truth is, if you succeed every time, your goals aren't ambitious enough.

You have been born into an age of extraordinary possibilities. Franklin Roosevelt once wrote to Winston Churchill that "it's fun being in the same decade as you," and I feel the same way about our time. For most of human history, in most of the world, poverty and violence have been the human condition. But now, the dream of freedom is sweeping across the world. There is a growing consensus that democratic governments are the most legitimate, that economies should be liberalized, and that fundamental rights need to be universally guaranteed. When Franklin Roosevelt promised the world "Four Freedoms" – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear – he was offering a radical idea. But in 2006, billions of people have signed on to his dream. This is a rare and precious change.

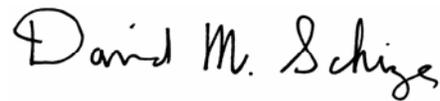
But the truth is, this progress is fragile. The threats to our way of life are familiar – from terrorism and nuclear proliferation to economic meltdowns and environmental devastation. We live our lives under a cloud of uncertainty, knowing that forces beyond our control can dramatically alter our lives. At one level, this is profoundly unnerving. But the silver lining is that we are all in this together.

As I look around South Field, I can't imagine a finer group of partners to have in this struggle to tame a daunting world. Lawyers are the infrastructure of freedom, and you will be a credit to our profession. You are a stunningly gifted group. Like the Roosevelts, like Governor Pataki, like so many other Columbians who have come before you, you will assume positions of leadership – in many fields, and in many different parts of the world. We have taught you here to exercise that authority with wisdom and responsibility. We expect great things from the Class of 2006, and I hope that Columbia Law School remains an important part of your lives. Thank you, and congratulations!

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After my remarks were concluded, we heard a terrific speech from Governor Pataki. I know you share with me the pride and hope so evident at the graduation ceremony, and wish you all the best for the summer.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David M. Schizer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

David M. Schizer
Dean and the Lucy G. Moses
Professor of Law