

**Remarks of Dean Gillian Lester
Columbia Law Graduation
Monday, May 14, 2018**

Thank you, Patricia – and thank you, Mica.

Good evening and congratulations to the Class of 2018!

Graduates, you have worked very hard to reach this milestone. All of us here on the stage—and the generations of Columbians who have come before you—stand together in saluting you today. We take tremendous pride in all that you have accomplished. But, even more than that, we are excited for what the future holds.

I see you have brought a few guests to celebrate with you this evening! Welcome to all of you—parents, spouses, children, friends, loved ones. We congratulate you as well for all that *you* have sacrificed and contributed to make this day possible.

Graduates, please stand and show your loved ones how grateful you are for their support.

Today, I am optimistic. And no, that is not a typo. I am *optimistic*. At a time when our country—our world—is more polarized than it has been in decades, I feel a sense of hope.

Perhaps no one here understands what I mean better than the graduates of the Class of 1968—who, this year, mark the 50th anniversary of the day they walked across this stage. Several graduates from that class have joined us today, and we're honored to welcome them back.

Class of 1968, please wave so we can acknowledge you.

As these esteemed alumni would no doubt attest, 1968 was among the most tumultuous and divided years in our nation's history—a year that tested the strength of our country, and our campus. The simmering tensions of the day—Vietnam, racial justice, fair housing—boiled over as students occupied Hamilton Hall, which still stands right next to us.

As I reflect on the events of 50 years ago that continue to reverberate in our world, I see echoes today of the ways that we can become stuck in times of deep division. Of the things that fuel, rather than dampen, anger and distrust. Of the impediments that can make common ground so hard to find.

Two in particular stand out for me: talking past one another... and failing to understand the perspectives of those with whom we disagree.

Why single these out? Because for lawyers, both can be hazards of our trade.

We are taught to speak eloquently and forcefully in furtherance of our client's position. But it is all too easy, when deploying one's skill with language, to fail to hear others over the sound of one's own voice.

We are asked—indeed we have a duty—to advocate zealously on behalf of our clients. But it is tempting—indeed, simple human psychology can pull us this way—to paint one's adversary in bold archetypes, to tell oneself a hero's story devoid of nuance, all the more to affirm the rightness of one's own position.

These are the habits of an unreflective lawyer; the best lawyer works to overcome these temptations: knows how to speak but also to hear; to advocate, but also to seek to understand the passion that ignites those with whom they disagree.

It is these qualities that will make you not only a better lawyer, but also a better citizen and a better person.

Let me just give an example. In his role as top lawyer at the Department of Defense, tonight's keynote speaker, Jeh Johnson, Class of 1982, was charged with assessing the potential impact of ending the military's controversial "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which banned gay men and women from serving openly in the military.

To answer this question, he held town hall meetings at military bases across the world. He sought input from hundreds of thousands of troops. He interviewed spouses, gay rights leaders, social conservatives, military chaplains. And, what he found was that perspectives were many and varied both across and within the groups he met. And, in the end, Secretary Johnson won the respect of those who opposed change—because he listened to them, and he sought to understand their points of view.

Graduates, you enter the profession at a time when the world faces no shortage of challenges and a polarized discourse that affects the very character of our nation and body politic.

But, as lawyers, we cannot afford to be spectators. We have a higher calling. So, today, on this amazing day where we look back and look forward at the same time, I ask of you the following:

Wherever your Columbia law degree may take you—as advocates, negotiators, mediators, dealmakers, and diplomats—speak, but also *listen* and *hear* what others have to say. Use your mastery of the law and the power of language to lead us all to a greater understanding of *one another* and to help us bridge our divides.

Which brings me to why today, despite the polarized time in which we live, I am overflowing with optimism. For it is not just any hands that will be steadying us. But yours. Columbia Law School graduates. *Your* hands. *Your* minds. *Your* words. *Your* ears. *Your* actions. You will be there to guide us forward.

Class of 2018, on behalf of all of us here at Columbia Law School, I salute you and I congratulate you.