



Remarks of Xavier Becerra¹
Columbia Law Graduation
Monday, May 20, 2019

To Dean Lester, the Columbia Law School faculty and staff, to all the invited guests and dignitaries: I wish to thank you for inviting me to be with you today. I came from California. I thought I would bring the 70-degree weather. I apologize to all of you, those of you who are not from New York and were not expecting this, but this is New York, right? And that's what makes New York special.

And so we are thrilled to be here with you, but we really want to say more than anything else that we're thrilled to see these folks in blue robes more than anything else in the world. Class of 2019, this is your day. Congratulations to you.

We've just heard about some of the outstanding achievements of many of these students. I have the distinct honor of being here both as your 160th commencement speaker and as a parent, as you've heard, so I know exactly how proud many of you as parents and loved ones are to see this special person here in this blue robe today.

In fact, for me, it still takes a little getting used to be here. And I don't mean just here at this podium—I mean here at commencement, because for my wife and I, it's a new experience to actually get to see people graduate from college. It's an even greater experience when you get to watch your children do that for the first time as well. And so we are thankful to all those who made it possible for those first timers to be here today and to get to live that world that so many had partaken in the past.

I also am thrilled to be here because by being asked to deliver today's commencement address, it was a clear giveaway that my daughter had graduated on time. And boy, did she graduate.

I watched her nail it yesterday evening at the BLSA/LaLSA graduation ceremony. She was one of the speakers. We learned about many of the students who are graduating here at Columbia today. We learned about their many achievements, and we learned about so many of the firsts of some of these individuals.

¹ Attorney General, State of California (2017–Present); Representative, U.S. House of Representatives (1993–2017); Member, California State Assembly (1990–1992); Deputy Attorney General, Office of the Attorney General, State of California (1987–1990)

I know that your parents really want to make the most of this opportunity. Being here today, especially if they are like my parents, who really, really would have preferred that I'd been a doctor, I chose to follow my own path. And yesterday, we heard about a lot of folks of immigrant background who were told, "You should be a doctor."

And while I never did get the M.D., I did make it to A.G., representing 40 million people here in this great country.

They probably would have still preferred me being a doctor. Luckily, I married one, and so did my daughter.

I don't know what would your parents dreamed that you would become—maybe a doctor, maybe a techie, an entrepreneur. But I'm glad you chose this route. You chose to ensure everyone who wants legal representation will have it. You chose to protect the presumption of innocence. You chose to give the people their day in court.

I remember the first, and only, time my parents, swindled out of some modest savings years in the making, needed an attorney. He meant well, but he was way out of his league. Actually, he didn't know what he was doing. But that was all that they could afford. There aren't many options when you're a construction worker with a sixth grade education and a clerical worker with an accent. They put their trust in him, but he couldn't deliver. I couldn't deliver.

I think I was a sophomore in college at the time, and I was the closest thing that my parents had, or could afford, to legal help. I tried, but I really couldn't give my parents the day in court that they deserved.

Sometimes you fall—but sometimes you don't. You'll never know until you try it. That's why you have to test yourself every day. You did it for three years, and here you are. Now comes the big test.

Some of you have already been doing this for well beyond three years, just to get here. You went beyond. Like me, you may be the first-generation American in your family. Like me, you may be the first in your family to attend a university. Or like me, you may have been the first to actually get to finish law school.

Well, let me give you the well-known secret about firsts. They're better when you chase them. Don't wait. Ask Thomas Edison, Sally Ride, Sonia Sotomayor, Barack Obama. Ask the 1980 U.S. men's Olympic hockey team or the 2016 Cleveland Cavaliers. 2016 Cleveland Cavaliers.

I've experienced my share of firsts. I've been cussed out by a president. I witnessed 9/11 from our capital. I cast votes on war and impeachment. I have sued and beaten a president of the United States.

And as I learned from my parents, not every first will be a success. But when you survive the verbal assault from the commander in chief, there is no insult or intimidation you can't handle. When you're able to confront the aftermath of 9/11, you learn to take no threat for granted. When you have to hand the American flag to the spouse of a fallen soldier, you begin to understand real sacrifice.

In my nearly 30 years of public service, I have fallen a lot. I fought to stop discriminatory bans against gay marriage in 1996. I fought against the Iraq War in 2003. While we passed the Affordable Care Act in 2010, we came up short in achieving Medicare for all. And when we passed the DREAM Act for America's young immigrant Dreamers through the House of Representatives in 2010, we fell four votes shy of overcoming a Republican filibuster in the Senate.

But through it all, I learned the most important lesson—how to fall forward. How to learn from those missteps, to try again, and get it right the next time around.

Last month, I settled a case against Morgan Stanley to restore the pension savings of teachers and public workers of California who, like my parents, were taken advantage of. We recovered 150 million dollars.

And the president that California sued and beat? Well, we've done it another 49 times. So far, California's been almost perfect in our challenges to the federal government, with more than 30 victories in our court rulings from several of those 50 cases. When this administration tried to take a woman's right to choose, we sued. When this administration tried to tell women they couldn't choose their own contraceptive, we sued. When this administration tried to tell us that we would undercount in the census by including a question that would keep people from participating, we sued. When this administration tried to tell Americans—patriotic Americans who wanted to serve their country and were told no because they were transgender—we sued.

And in each of those cases, we won a nationwide injunction to stop the administration from moving forward those policies because it is important to defend those people's rights.

That's a lot of cases, and that's a lot of wrongful behavior, and in California, we keep leaning forward. We are reminded every day of the importance of solid institutions—the kind that legal minds coming out of this institution build and the kind that you need to protect.

Your Columbia Law family is a storied one. Yours is a line of revolutionaries, of nation builders, of lawmakers. Your Columbia Law ancestors wrote the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers. They built the Treasury, served as the Supreme Court's first chief justice, and occupied the Oval Office. Your Columbia family steps up.

When the call comes, they help codify and protect the rights of the people who call this nation home, rights that we are taking for granted, rights that are disappearing, rights that you are now charged to defend. It's your job to decide what that means. No pressure.

I know you've spent the last three years studying some of the most important story cases in our nation's history and learning about the precedents they've created and how to follow them. But we must ask ourselves: Who set those precedents? Who were they made to benefit?

I try to ask myself those questions when I see failures of justice. When I became the attorney general of California, I saw that people were awaiting trial in jail, even though they hadn't been tried or convicted, simply because they couldn't afford to make bail. That wasn't just.

As your fellow alum Chief Justice John Jay wrote, "Justice is indiscriminately due to all without regard to numbers, wealth, or rank." When I took office, the California Department of Justice was in the practice of defending the judges who made those bail determinations when they were challenged by the defendants.

But I asked my team, "What would happen if we stopped defending those determinations?" We'd end up upending the entire system. So we did it. And today, California has passed a bail reform law that says, moving forward, pretrial detention will be based on your danger to the public, not the dollars in your pocket.

We haven't fixed our criminal justice system completely yet. But that decision was a powerful reminder to me and to our state of what can happen when we consider doing things differently than the way they've always been done before.

I urge you—think outside the box. Take on new challenges. Think about opening doors. Lean forward. Fall forward. Be the first.

My parents worked day and night to open doors for me that I couldn't open for them. My father still remembers the days when he couldn't walk into restaurants because of the signs on the doors that said "no dogs or Mexicans allowed." So he and my mother made sure I knew what it was to

work—that it was my job, that it was do whatever I could to open doors for others, to make sure that people weren't getting shut out by the law.

I'm asking you today to do the same: to set new precedents, to open as many doors as possible.

You didn't come this far and work this far just to step in line, just to read the signs and do as they say. You are here, not just to interpret authority, but to join in that great Columbia tradition of questioning it and shaping it; of writing wrongs and rewriting the rules. That's what leadership looks like, and it looks like asking the tough questions and demanding honest answers. It looks like chasing those firsts and falling forward. It looks like stepping up to the plate.

This country needs more leaders like that. FDR, Columbia. RBG, Columbia. Class of 2019, it needs you to be them.

Today, you've opened a new door. I can't wait to see where you all will go from here.

Perhaps John Lewis said it best, a dear friend and colleague in Congress and a civil rights icon, when he said, "You want to make change? You got to get into trouble. Good trouble."

Or perhaps it's as the Dreamers in America who are looking for the opportunity to come out of the shadows, who publicly come out and declare that they are undocumented and unafraid.

Or perhaps it's as the poet Dylan Thomas once said in a poem, where I paraphrase, "Do not go quietly into that good night. Rage, rage, against the dying of the light."

My friends, family, let us be the first to congratulate each and every distinguished member of the Columbia Law School Class of 2019. They are the leaders of tomorrow. They will rage and rage against the dying of the light. Thank you all very much.