

**Remarks of Antony J. Blinken '88
U.S. Secretary of State
Keynote Address
Columbia Law School Graduation
Thursday, April 29, 2021**

Hello, Columbia Law Class of 2021. I am honored and delighted to be part of your commencement. This is a big day. It's a big day for the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and other loved ones who've supported you and take so much pride in seeing you graduate, even if we can't cheer together in person. It's a big day for the professors, teaching assistants, and staff who challenged and guided you live and on Zoom. For the friends who kept you company on your journey and made hard days a little easier and good days even brighter.

Most of all, it's a big day for you, Class of 2021. You've achieved something remarkable, and you've done it during an incredibly difficult time. Earning a law degree from Columbia isn't easy under the best of circumstances. You've done it through lockdowns, through isolation, in a city that was loud with ambulances, then eerily quiet. You've had to forgo opportunities. You haven't been able to meet new people or visit family or friends. Some of you have gotten sick or lost someone you love.

Getting through these semesters has taken a lot of fortitude. It also may have taken a lot out of you. So I really hope you're able to savor, at least for a moment, what you've accomplished and replenish before moving on to what's next. Today, you all join esteemed ranks of Columbia Law grads, including legendary Justices Benjamin Cardozo and Ruth Bader Ginsburg and civil rights activists like Bella Abzug, Paul Robeson, James Meredith. There were also two presidents: Teddy Roosevelt was Class of 1882, but he never graduated. Franklin Roosevelt was class of 1907; he didn't graduate either. Yet they went on to become transformative presidents, one turning America into a global power and earning a Nobel Peace Prize, the other leading us through the Great Depression, World War II, and serving a record four terms. Today, you've done something they didn't. You've earned a diploma from Columbia Law School.

I'm also aware of who came before me. Last year's commencement speaker was a then unemployed lawyer who hadn't practiced in decades. Now, he's leader of the free world. I'll do my best to live up to his standard.

When Dean Lester invited me to speak today, I quickly said yes for two reasons. The first is that not too long ago—or at least that's how it feels—I was exactly where you are, wrapping up three years at Columbia Law and wondering what in the world would come next. For me, law

school was captured pretty well by my first class on my first day: Civil Procedure with Professor Hans Smit. Hans Smit was 6 foot 4, bald, and once nearly qualified for the Dutch Olympic water polo team. He was an intimidating presence. We felt like small children in front of him.

The very first class on the very first day of my law school career, Professor Smit pointed at one of my classmates, asked her to stand, and fired a question at her, Socratic style. As she was mustering up the courage to respond, he put up his hand, and said, “Stop. Wait, before you answer, there’s one thing you must know: No matter what you say, you’ll be wrong.”

That was law school for me in a nutshell. Lots of questions, not always a lot of cut-and-dried answers. Some days I really liked it. It was like learning a new language. I studied with remarkable professors, including the legendary ambassador Richard Gardner, an international trade and nuclear arms expert. Harvey Goldschmid, who was such a captivating teacher that he made a subject I never thought I’d be interested in—corporations—come alive. And I made great friends and bought my share of rounds at the late, lamented West End Bar.

Here’s what law school didn’t lead me to: a career in the law. I gave it a try, I joined a big firm, like I suspect many of you will. There were brilliant people working there, challenging cases. And, of course, the salary wasn’t bad either. Some of you may find that you love those jobs, as many of my friends did and still do. I hope you do. In my case, I lasted one year, 10 months, three days, and five hours. It just wasn’t for me.

We spend a huge portion of our lives at work. And if at all possible, you need to love what you do. Not all the time. Even the best jobs have bad days. But if there are too many days in a row or you’re feeling lost or disengaged or depleted, maybe it’s time to find a new path. So I said goodbye to Big Law and eventually I made my way to Washington, D.C., and wound up as a special assistant in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department. As you can probably tell from the title, it was a pretty junior role, certainly didn’t pay much. It wasn’t glamorous. My office was a room that, before I inhabited it, held a giant safe with space for pretty much nothing else, basically a windowless closet.

But I was hooked. Diplomacy felt urgent, challenging, and directly connected to improving people’s lives. It was a way to serve my country, which I badly wanted to do. And I felt so lucky to be able to do it because I had friends from law school who couldn’t afford to take a job like mine because of student debt. I felt grateful every morning walking into work. Today, my office as secretary of state is just one flight up from that airless closet where my life as a diplomat began. I even have a window now, and my law degree helped me get here.

Columbia taught me how to argue persuasively, to see the other side’s case, to focus on problem-solving. It taught me how laws and institutions at their best build trust and make it possible for people or countries to come together, even as adversaries, to hammer out agreements and make progress. I use my law school training virtually every day in this job, even if I couldn’t have planned exactly how it would help me get here.

I tell you this in case you also wonder what will come next for you. Maybe you've got a job waiting. Maybe it's something you're really excited to do. It might not turn out to be what you hoped. You might find yourself starting over, maybe even a few times. I did, and it turned out to be O.K.

Columbia Law grads are hyper-accomplished and driven. You're great planners, but even you can't plan your lives to the nanosecond, and even you can't lay out a perfect, linear path for your futures. Though it can be scary, listen to that voice inside you that says when something isn't right and needs to change. And stay open to fate, to chance, to luck, to love. They lead you where your heart wants to go. That's how you end up leading a life that's right for you. Not another Columbia Law School graduate, not your parents, not your friends. You.

There's a second reason I wanted this opportunity to speak with you today, and it has to do with the degree that you've earned, the education you've received, the work I believe you are called to do with it. There's a strong connection between what we do at the State Department and the mission of Columbia Law School, and it's more important than ever.

There's a portrait hanging outside my office of the great John Jay, King's College Class of 1764, co-author of the Federalist Papers, first chief justice of the Supreme Court, and first secretary of state, on an interim basis while everyone waited for Thomas Jefferson to make his way home from France. As a founder of our fledgling democracy, John Jay understood that our country's greatest source of strength would be our commitment to the rule of law—not the size of our economy, not the strength of our military, our fidelity to the principle of equal justice for all. That principle is enshrined throughout the Constitution, amended over time as we recognized ways in which we fall short and had to do better. Everyone is entitled to due process. Everyone is entitled to equal protection. And the most powerful people in the land—judges, legislators, executive officers, including the president of the United States—are bound by the law just like everyone else.

More than anything else, that's the unique genius of the United States: Our system of laws, our capacity to adapt and improve, to recognize and correct injustices that it once ignored or even perpetuated. Leaders around the world have studied our system from the start. It's as vital to our national strength now as it was in John Jay's day. It's been tested throughout our history and it's been tested again in recent years. We've seen how justice can be deeply unequal for people of color, women, immigrants, LGBTQ people, and other marginalized populations. We've seen rights that should be sacred, like the right to vote, under threat. We've seen trust shaken in the public offices and institutions that exist to protect everyone.

And take it from me, this is a foreign policy priority as well as a national one because democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are under challenge, even under siege, in virtually every region of the world. And authoritarianism is on the rise. We want the rule of law to triumph. We need the rule of law to triumph because it's the foundation of stability and ultimately progress. It's how conflicts are mediated peacefully, how people can trust that those outcomes are fair, and how we can best push back against the brutal notion that might makes right.

In the growing competition between autocracy and democracy, the autocrats are making the argument that they can deliver for their people in a way that democracy can't. So the challenge we face today is to prove not only that democracy can deliver results for people but that it can do it in a way that's fair, equitable, transparent, humane. Our ability to stand up for these values depends on whether we're living up to them at home. When we fall short, the world takes note. Not only our adversaries but also countries that share our values and want to work with us. And when we live up to our ideals, when our elections are fair, our courts deliver justice, our press is vigorous and independent, the world sees that too.

At our best, we are a country driven by that first sentence in our Constitution: We want to form a more perfect union. That means, by definition, we acknowledge from the start our imperfections. We don't sweep them under the rug, ignore them, pretend they don't exist. We confront them openly and transparently. That can be painful, even ugly. But it makes us who we are, and, I believe, it sets us apart from other countries.

That's the spirit that we've got to bring to the urgent work of strengthening our justice system to make sure it honors the principle that all people are truly equal in rights and in dignity. And as the most recent graduates of one of the most distinguished law schools on Earth, no one is better positioned to do this work than you. That's true no matter what's next for you, whether you become a corporate lawyer, a constitutional scholar, a public defender, a candidate for office, or something else entirely. Might I suggest serving in government? There's no better time. Maybe even consider the State Department. We'd love to have you.

And let me give a special shout-out to all the international students graduating today. Columbia has an outstanding tradition of educating women and men from abroad who then become legal scholars, advocates, diplomats, and judges around the world. You in particular have a powerful opportunity to stand up for democracy and the rule of law around the world. Whatever your path, you can protect equal justice through the work you do, including the pro bono projects you take on. Through the professionalism you exhibit and your commitment to ethical behavior at every moment, especially when no one's watching.

You can do it by speaking up for people whose voices are silenced and challenging your colleagues and peers to do better for the planet and the less powerful. You can do it by bringing others along with you. You know this. The law can be inaccessible, confounding, intimidating, especially for those people whose lives are most affected by it. You have the knowledge to navigate it. You can make it legible to others. And in this way, you can empower them to fight for justice too.

As the great Ruth Bader Ginsburg put it, "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." That's what you're called on to do now. So, graduates, it may feel like you're graduating into a time of great uncertainty. Take heart. Many people are hard at work ending the pandemic, rebuilding the economy, protecting the planet, restoring justice. Soon, you'll be among them, and that gives me a great deal of hope.

So take a breath. Take a breath. Celebrate this achievement. Catch up on your sleep. And then, get to work because we need you. I know you will make us proud. Congratulations, Class of 2021, and good luck.