

Dean's Remarks:
Law School Class Day
May 18, 2025

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Thank you, Nicole [Morote], for your words of welcome and for your leadership of the Student Senate this past year.

Good afternoon!

It is my distinct pleasure, on behalf of the entire faculty and administration, to welcome you to Columbia Law School's graduation ceremony for the Class of 2025.

I want to offer a special greeting to our distinguished speakers, who are both, themselves, Columbia Law graduates: Governor Steve Bullock, Columbia Law School Class of 1994, and Professor Clare Huntington, Columbia Law School Class of 1996.

I also want to express my gratitude to the many members of the graduating class who contributed to making this day such a meaningful one. Please join me in thanking the Student Senate; our Graduation Committee Co-Chairs; and student speakers, Amir and Bitu, who will address their fellow graduates in just a few moments.

Let's give all of them a round of applause.

We are here today to celebrate you, Class of 2025 graduates. To recognize your many achievements. To express our gratitude for the ways in which you have shaped this institution, just as *it* has shaped *you*. And to send you forth into our venerated profession.

¹ Dean and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Law, Columbia Law School.

We commend and honor each and every one of you, but we recognize that this occasion is not yours alone. It also belongs to all those who have supported you, motivated you, and given of themselves so you could have the opportunity of a lifetime—to study the law here at Columbia.

It is fitting that so many of those important people flank you here today, because I suspect they have been at your side throughout your time in law school, and perhaps for much longer.

Graduates, as your final assignment, I would like you to stand, turn towards your loved ones and those you hold most dear, and share your gratitude and appreciation.

As Nicole mentioned, this is the first time I have had the privilege of addressing a graduating class here at Columbia Law School. But this is not my first time speaking at a graduation ceremony. Funny enough, I never had the chance to do so during my many years as a professor and administrator. The last time I spoke at a graduation ceremony was my own—when I was the student speaker at my undergraduate commencement almost 30 years ago.

Out of curiosity, I dusted off that speech just to see how it holds up. . . In short—not well!

The world has changed quite a bit since then! We have had the first Black President of the United States and the first Black Dean of Columbia Law School. We have lived to see both the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs win the World Series. I am not sure which one of these events was least likely to happen, but they all seemed utterly impossible back in those days.

On reflection, perhaps I should not be too surprised that the world has changed so much. For the overwhelming majority of you, your lives have coincided with one of the most dynamic periods of transformation in recorded human history. We are more global—more interconnected, more interdependent—than ever before.

And yet, despite the extraordinary amount of information available to us—*literally* at our fingertips—we increasingly make decisions based not on what we seek but what we are served. We let Spotify choose songs based on the kind of music we have listened to in the past. We read news articles recommended to us based on stories that we have read before. We flip through social media videos, click on targeted ads, and interact with chat bots that are all informed by an intimate knowledge of our interests and prior behavior.

You know better than me that these algorithmic recommendations are a core feature of modern life. They are embedded in so much of what we do. But what they add by way of convenience and efficiency, they risk taking away in exposure and agency. We have come to expect what we like—what feels comfortable and accessible—at the expense of serendipitous discovery, considered judgment, and critical engagement with all that is new and different.

These so-called “echo chambers” are not just an online phenomenon. As a society, we increasingly organize ourselves into self-contained, self-reinforcing ideological bubbles. Others, sometimes, do the organizing for us.

This sort of intellectual narrowness diminishes the quality of our thinking, it limits our breadth of imagination, and it corrodes our ability to listen, empathize, and understand. We see evidence of this in our discourse, in our politics, and in the way we relate to one another.

But, you, graduates. By virtue of your legal education here at Columbia Law School, *you* are uniquely positioned to break down these barriers. That is because—more than any legal code or statute, more than any treatise or case—you have learned *how* to think.

Not *what* to think; *how* to think.

You have felt productive discomfort in service of learning. You have learned how to craft penetrating questions, and test and refine potential answers. You know what it is like to engage in open inquiry—to pursue the truth regardless of where it leads. You have cultivated relationships with those whose backgrounds, perspectives, and life experiences are wildly different from your own.

These are foundational values that have endured here at Columbia Law School for nearly 170 years, but they have become rarer in society with each passing day.

In a world where we are, paradoxically, increasingly interconnected and increasingly siloed, knowing how to think is an especially powerful tool. I encourage you to use it—not just for your own benefit, but for the benefit of others, and for society at large.

When you find yourself—*and you will*—surrounded by those who admire you, seek your counsel, or even try to impress you, I implore you to resist the temptation to seek comfort in the familiar. Leverage the experience you have gained to ask the right questions, but do not rely only on the recommendations that are served up to you.

In those moments, remember your time at Columbia Law School. Remember the ways in which your professors challenged you with a frustratingly insightful hypothetical. Remember how your classmates helped you see an issue from an entirely new perspective you had not considered previously.

Listen first to understand, not to agree or disagree. Seek to broaden the conversation, not to limit it. Question the prevailing wisdom and push back against ideological orthodoxies.

Most of all, remember to carry forward the mantle of Columbia's proud and storied legacy—one dedicated to teaching law students how to be critical and independent thinkers committed to free speech, to constitutional democracy, and to a deep and profound respect for the rule of law.

Members of the Class of 2025, you have the special opportunity and responsibility to carry your legal training with you. You will shape and define the direction of our global society in ways that I could not have possibly imagined when I spoke to my fellow graduates long ago. And, in moments like this, when our values have been challenged and our principles questioned, Columbia lawyers must show the world what it means to lead.

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Congratulations, members of the Class of 2025. I wish you all the best and I hope you will come back to see us from time to time.

Thank you.

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