

Dean's Remarks:
Law School Class Day
May 17, 2026

DANIEL ABEBE¹

Thank you, [outgoing Student Senate President] Celeste [Woloshyn].

Let me take this opportunity to express my gratitude to you and your colleagues on the Student Senate Executive Committee for your leadership this year. Celeste, we have worked together since my first days as Dean, and I have very much valued our partnership. I wish you all the best as you head to your clerkship.

Good afternoon. My name is Daniel Abebe, and I am proud to serve as Dean of Columbia Law School. It is my distinct honor, on behalf of the faculty and administration of Columbia Law School seated behind me, to welcome you to the graduation ceremony for the Class of 2026!

I want to offer a special welcome to our keynote speaker, former United States Solicitor General Don Verrilli; to our distinguished faculty honoree, Professor Olati Johnson; and to the members of the Classes of 1976 and 1971, who are here celebrating their 50th and 55th Reunions.

I also want to take a moment to recognize those of you who are seated on either side of the stage. The parents and grandparents, siblings and children, loved ones, and friends. For all that our students learned at Columbia Law School, they most certainly learned more from you. You have been a source of inspiration and strength, meaning and purpose. And, while we are here to honor this incredible Class, this day belongs just as much to all of you. Congratulations!

Today, we come together to celebrate one of the academy's great traditions.

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

We don these flowing robes and velvet hats. We process across the stone walkways of this historic campus. And we call our students forward by name so that we can recognize them for their many achievements.

These graduation rituals endure not simply because they are old, or formal, or symbolic. They endure because they mark something deeply human: an opportunity for introspection in a moment of transition.

Graduation invites us to do three things at once—to look backward with honesty at what we have experienced; to look inward with reflection at the values that guide us; and to look forward with purpose at all that we hope to accomplish.

Class of 2026: Whether you have spent a year at Columbia Law School as an LL.M. student, or three years here pursuing your J.D., there is no question that you have been faced with a period of profound upheaval and uncertainty.

You have experienced moments when the physical life of this campus changed around you. Moments when routines were interrupted and long-held norms were upended. Moments when disagreement felt less like debate and more like fracture. Moments that strained this community's sense of self; that tested our faith in institutions and one another; and even, perhaps, in the purpose of education itself.

But in traversing these moments of difficulty, graduates, you have not shied away. You have looked inward and remained steadfastly committed to the values that animate our profession: honesty and truth; intellectual curiosity and professional integrity; respect for others and for the rule of law.

We have seen you do this again and again during your time at Columbia Law School. In the way you have shown up for your classmates, your professors, your organizations, and your communities. In the way that you have engaged, given back, and—as evidenced by the video that opened this ceremony—shown compassion.

We have seen you continue to care. Continue to extend grace in moments of disagreement. Continue to believe that rigor matters. That character matters. That supporting each other matters.

Graduates: You have reached this point not because you avoided difficulty, but because you have learned how to move through it without losing sight of what matters most.

You are resilient. And that resilience is not *incidental* to your education—it is *part* of your education. The law, after all, is not practiced in ideal conditions. And, true leadership is not exercised in moments of comfort or certainty.

The world you are entering is changing rapidly. Artificial Intelligence is reshaping the nature of legal work. Institutions are under mounting pressure. And the questions that our society will need to confront are becoming more complex, not less.

As you look forward and head out into the world, I hope you will recognize that these periods of challenge have also been periods of formation.

Remember, the bridges you have built across difference, and the productive discomfort you have felt in the service of learning, have taught you something. Something about who you are, what you value, and what kind of lawyer, leader, and person you aspire to become.

More importantly, the seriousness, empathy, and commitment you have demonstrated during your time at Columbia Law School are qualities that our world desperately needs. Your responsibility now is not simply to remain grounded in those values, but to exemplify them for others.

In that sense, your success will never belong to you alone. Your success will be reflected in the institutions you strengthen, the clients you serve, the causes you advance, and the legacy you create for those who come after you. Your success is—and always will be—part of our success, too. And we will continue to support you and cheer you on with immense pride.

Class of 2026: As you move on from Columbia Law School, I hope you will look back with fulfillment, look inward with clarity, and look forward with conviction.

Congratulations, and best wishes.

Thank you.

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