

## Remarks for Commencement 2024

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"I must study Politics and War that my children may have liberty to study Mathematics and Philosophy. My children ought to study Mathematics and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Music, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelain." - John Adams wrote that in a letter to Abigail Adams, on May 12, 1780.

This is, in my opinion, the best summary of "the American Dream," written at a time when America itself was still barely more than a dream, by one of the men whose ideas created that dream in the first place. It's also a dream that has been systematically denied to many.

Today, all of you are following that dream in your own way, working to make not just your own life better, but that of your children and their children as well, but I wanted to re-focus that idea back to its original meaning.

Over the last 150 years or so, the "American Dream" has been misinterpreted, hijacked really, to promote material success and consumerism as the only measure of success. Even the US government ranks colleges and universities on their graduates' salaries on its "College Scorecard" as if salary alone defines the quality of an education, if not a meaningful life itself.

It was this version of the dream led George Carlin to famously joke "it's called the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it". (Yes, I just quoted John Adams and George Carlin in the same speech.)

However .... Just as the American Revolution was not a mere "tax revolt," the American Dream is much more than the mindless pursuit of wealth. If you read Adams' words closely, you can see that he did not view success in commerce and business as an end, but as a necessary step along the road to a better society. A way of preparing the ground for future generations to harvest the bounty that a free, democratic society could produce.

When he talks about his children and their childrens' opportunities, the focus is not on the profession, but on the freedom to choose one's own path. The legacy he dreamed for future generations was the freedom to pursue one's dreams, not just wealth. The dream, not just for his children, but all of the people, was also the freedom to stop and appreciate the beauty of the art, and music and poetry around them.

So as each of you leaves today with your newly-minted degrees, to pursue you careers and your own dreams, don't forget to take the time to appreciate the art, the music, and the poetry. Perhaps even something you learned about in one of those Gen-Ed classes you didn't want to take.

Remember to encourage your children and their children to see and create the art and poetry themselves, ideally before the world turns them into cynics. And finally, as Adams noted, this is a community effort. Use the knowledge and skills you have learned here, not just for your career, but to get involved in your communities so that our children and grandchildren have the right to not only appreciate the art and poetry around them, but to make their own.

Thank you and good luck!