

President Clinton's Keynote Address, Cooper Union Commencement 2006

Thank you, President Campbell, Chairman Drucker, members of the board, faculty and staff. Swami Adiswarananda, ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2006, your family and friends. I have had a wonderful time today, and like you, was transfixed by my co-speaker and friend, Anna Deavere Smith. You ought to hear her imitate me. I started to just give her the speech and let her do it twice. And Mr. Krishnan, I'm glad you're not going to be an engineer or you would have missed your calling. You did a wonderful job for your classmates today.

I actually feel rather like I did the first time I gave an address as an elected official. More than twenty-nine years ago I was a thirty-year-old young Attorney General and I was invited to address the Officer's Installation banquet of the Pine Bluff Rotary Club. And the dinner started at 6:30. There were 500 people there, and all but about three got introduced, and they went home mad. There must have been fifteen speakers. I got up to speak at a quarter to ten. I was nervous enough as it was. And this very nice man who later became a lifetime friend, this president of the club, he was to introduce me. And his very first remarks were, "You know, we could have stopped here and had a very nice evening." I know what he meant. And we could have stopped a few moments ago and have had a magnificent day.

But I thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this important moment in your life, and for giving me the chance to come back to this American treasure, Cooper Union. This was the first American institution to offer tuition-free higher education to women and men, to immigrants and working people, at a time when our universities were largely populated by the economic and social elite. Peter Cooper was far ahead of his time, and all of you are the heirs of his generous and wise vision. Even before classes began here in the late 1850s, Cooper's Great Hall offered a magnetic platform for all kinds of speakers to address discriminating audiences in this, the commercial, cultural, and media capital of the nation.

As President Campbell said, presidents Lincoln, Grant, Cleveland, Taft, and Theodore Roosevelt all spoke here before they were elected. President Wilson and I spoke while in office. I remember well coming to this hallowed hall in early 1993 to make a case for my new economic plan, the dramatic reversal of the trickle-down theory of the previous twelve years, and, it turns out, the subsequent age, which in those years had quadrupled the national debt, increased poverty, concentrated extreme wealth in fewer hands, and left middle class wages stagnant. I proposed to replace trickle-down with an invest and grow plan that was fiscally conservative, socially progressive, and wildly controversial, because it raised taxes on the wealthiest Americans, reduced them for lower income working families, cut less essential government spending to increase investment dramatically in education and new technologies to fuel economic growth. My Cooper Union debut must not have been too persuasive. The plan only passed by one vote in the House and one vote in the Senate. And that was Vice President Gore breaking the tie. I think the people here must remember it in the same way. I noticed in the photographic exhibit outside of all the people who come here, the picture of me has been decorated –

no doubt by one of your art graduates – by someone drawing sunglasses on it, making me look more like a member of the Blues Brothers than the President. Still, the Cooper Union Forum gave me a chance to advance a plan in which I deeply believed, that ultimately produced the longest economic expansion and largest job growth in peacetime history, three consecutive budget surpluses for the first time in seventy years, and most importantly to me, a hundred times more people moving out of poverty than in the previous twelve years.

But as important as that speech was to me and to our country, its significance pales to the greatest address ever delivered from this platform, on February 27th, 1860, by Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln accepted an invitation to speak in New York at a time when the nation was deeply divided on the question of slavery. Indeed, most people in this city supported it because the New York ports made so much money out of trading Southern cotton. The future of the nation was in doubt. Leaders representing the slaveholding states of the South argued that the Constitution protected their rights to own fellow human beings everywhere in the United States. The abolitionists argued that slavery was morally wrong and that our Constitutional commitment to equality required the nation to end slavery immediately, even if it broke the country apart.

As the nation drifted toward Civil War, two leaders arose out of Illinois to try to bridge the divide and preserve our Union. Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas argued for a concept he called “popular sovereignty.” He argued slavery could be extended beyond the South if a majority of the voters in a given state voted for it. Abraham Lincoln, the man Mr. Douglas defeated for that Senate seat, argued that slavery was morally wrong, that the Constitution allowed Congress to stop its spread, and that Congress should do so, but that slavery should be allowed to continue in the South in order to preserve the Union.

Lincoln came to Cooper Union not only to push his argument that the federal government had the power to forbid the spread of slavery beyond the South, but also in the personal hope of catapulting himself into the front ranks of contenders for the presidential nomination of the young Republican party along with the then frontrunner, Senator William Seward of New York. His speech was so well received and so widely publicized that the enthusiastic acclaim lifted Lincoln to the Republican nomination, and to the presidency.

You may fairly ask, on this important day in your lives in 2006, why in the world I would dwell on an address delivered 146 years ago when there are so many important contemporary issues to discuss: terror, religious and ethnic conflict, nuclear arms, Iraq, Darfur, Avian influenza, AIDS, TB and malaria, global poverty, and global warming. Or all the positive benefits of this age of global interdependence. I do so because I hope to persuade you that how Mr. Lincoln made his case and what his larger purpose was have particular relevance to your future. I hope to persuade you, in other words, that it's the best way to fill the holes in Anna Deavere's pot.

You leave here with intelligence, knowledge and skills – a vast reservoir of power, personal power, to pursue your dreams as builders, problem-solvers, and artists. The question I want you to ask and answer for yourselves is the one Lincoln answered here 146 years ago: *How will you use your talent, and to what end, not only as professionals, but as citizens?*

By today's standards, Lincoln's address was highly unusual. In the first place, it was long, about 7,700 words. He did an exhaustive amount of research himself, into the question of what the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution believed about the power of the federal government to limit slavery. And he wrote every single word of the address himself, over and over and over until he had it just right. He also made an argument that was highly reasoned for his position, based on the facts he found in his research. The speech offered a minimum of rhetorical flourish and politic potshots, the kind of thing that marked most political speeches back then and all too many still today. Lincoln strongly defended his position and clearly stated the differences he had with his opponents, those on the Right, who favored the extension of slavery everywhere, at least if people voted for it, and those on the Left who favored the immediate abolition, even if it tore the nation asunder. However, he also treated his adversaries with respect, and urged them at least to agree to preserve the Union in spite of all their differences. In those days, once nominated, presidential candidates, believe it or not, didn't personally campaign. They couldn't make speeches; it was considered bad form. They were just supposed to go home, let their friends do the work, and wait for the voters to decide.

After the Cooper Union speech, Mr. Lincoln gave several more in this part of our country, all of them slightly modified versions of what he said on this platform. Then he went home and said nothing more that was new until after the election. In essence, the Cooper Union speech was Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign. The Republican platform reflected it, and when people all over the country wanted to know what he stood for, Lincoln's supporters just gave them copies of the Cooper Union address, with its ringing closing conviction, that right makes might.

Why does this matter to you? Because Lincoln's painstaking reliance on the evidence and on arguments that flowed from it, his passionate but respectful treatment of his opponents, and his determination to preserve our national union are all desperately needed today, as we confront the challenges and opportunities of our age of interdependence. Too often in the past twenty-five years our elections and political discourse have been marked by the triumph of personal attacks, baseless or irrelevant assertions, and blind ideology over evidence and argument. Too often the purpose of an election has been to concentrate wealth and power by dividing the public, and diverting their attention away from pressing problems to matters that excite deep personal passions, but they will take up less than one percent of a candidate's time, should he or she be elected. But all the attacks, the accusations, and the ideological diatribes cannot make the facts go away. They matter, and has often been said, they are stubborn things. They matter, and so do thinking, reasoning, and honest, respectful arguing, especially when the problems and their solutions are complex and elusive. And this is a complex and elusive time.

To those of us with a good education, access to technology, the certainty of fulfilling work, and a high comfort level with our increasingly diverse society, it is a great time to be alive. But to the victims of terror and ethnic and religious conflict, or workers in wealthy countries whose incomes fall further behind as their jobs grow more insecure, or the billions who live on less than two dollars a day or less, or those who suffer from untreated AIDS, TB, malaria, and infections related to dirty water just because they're poor, or those who live in places already being harmed by the most rapid warming of the planet in 200,000 years – to those people, the modern world is at best a mixed blessing.

The great challenge of the new millennium is to build the positive and reduce the negative forces of our common interdependence, and in so doing, to build more integrated communities of shared responsibilities, shared opportunities, and shared values. Can there be any in a world so diverse? I believe there can, if they are simple, straightforward, and inclusive. Everyone deserves a chance and has a responsible role to play. Competition is good, but we do better when we work together. Our differences matter. They make life more interesting and the search for answers more promising. But our common humanity matters more. If we can build such communities, we can meet all the challenges of this millennium, from terror, to extreme poverty, to AIDS, to climate change. But we can only build them if we have both responsible government policies, and vigorous efforts to advance the common good by private citizens.

When the tsunami struck South Asia, Americans donated 1.2 billion dollars for relief and recovery. Thirty percent of our households contributed, more than half of them over the internet, which has given ordinary citizens unprecedented and extraordinary power to do public good when they band together. Interestingly, Indonesia, the hardest hit country, the world's most populous Muslim country, is the only Muslim nation where public approval of the United States has dramatically increased since the advent of the conflict in Iraq. Why? Because of the work of the United States military and civilian personnel, the generosity of our citizens, and the efforts of Americans involved in religious and secular nongovernmental organizations. These NGOs are exploding in their numbers and scope all over the world. They offer all of us, and indeed, people everywhere, a new chance to make a real difference.

But politics and government, how they are conducted and to what end, remain profoundly important. We cannot hope to move from the present unequal and unstable state of interdependence to integrated national and global communities if we continue to fight elections and govern on such narrow grounds, where tactics are sure to produce more heat than light, to further enrich and entrench already powerful special interests, and to divide us into warring camps, incapable of principled compromise. I believe our people know this. The deep yearning for a larger unifying politics explains at least in part the very strong positive reaction former president Bush and I have received for our work together in the aftermath of the tsunami and hurricane Katrina. It explains why lawmakers like my wife and Senator McCain are trying to find common ground on climate change, and why Hillary reaches out to Republicans as well as Democrats to find

solutions to health care, the loss of manufacturing jobs, the needs of men and women in uniform.

At Cooper Union, 146 years ago, Abraham Lincoln's entire argument for the proposition that the federal government could limit slavery and should do so was based on his original research into the opinions on that subject, of the thirty-nine signers of the United States Constitution. He was determined to be faithful to their principles and to the permanent mission given to America by our founders to form a more perfect Union. They knew enough about human nature to know that our nation could never be perfect. But they also believed in the idea of progress and the power of dreams. We could always be more perfect than we are, always widening the circle of opportunity, expanding the reach of freedom, strengthening our common bonds. The founders were right. And Abraham Lincoln was right to follow them. He saved the country and ultimately freed the slaves. His most faithful and progressive successors in office were right to follow Mr. Lincoln and the founders before him. That's why we're still around today, the world's oldest large democracy, still growing and changing.

As you embark on this next great adventure in your lives, I urge you to remember, in your work and your citizenship, not only the education you've received here at Cooper Union, but the lessons taught here by Abraham Lincoln 146 years ago: Use evidence, reason, and respectful argument to search for a more perfect Union. Do so with an ever-inquiring mind and an open heart—in Mr. Lincoln's immortal words, "With malice toward none." I'm old enough now to know that life is precious and fleeting. So waste not a moment. Live your dreams. But find some way to help empower other people to live theirs too. And never forget our obligation to preserve that very same chance for your children, your grandchildren, and other generations down through the ages. I wish you well.