President Emmert, distinguished guests and all the people of the hour – the graduates.

This is indeed an impressive and large audience. The only larger audience I have ever addressed was at a University of Texas graduation some twenty years ago. They would like that - size matters in Texas.

At that event, we robed notables were to file through the entire audience and then back up to our seats in front of the Lyndon Baines Johnson library. We were outdoors. As I passed my assigned seat, I dropped my speech on my chair. It was windy that day and when I returned, I discovered to my horror, about half of my speech had blown away.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the first or second half, but pages four through seven and ten through fourteen and so on.

I told the audience what had happened and they all laughed convinced, I guess that I was joking.

Well, I stumbled through some of what I had, which sounded I was sure like the random disconnected thoughts of a Washington D.C. bureaucrat. (Which I was at the time, I was the Administrator of EPA.)

Given the distance between me and the vast assemblage, I couldn't see the faces before me; I was convinced they must be twisted in puzzlement. The whole speech took about nine minutes. When I sat down, I had a new appreciation of the phrase, scattered applause - I was despondent.

After the speech, to my utter amazement, person after person came up to me and said something like “that was the finest Commencement speech I have ever heard” or “thanks for getting us out of the sun”.

That experience convinced me of two things. First, no one ever pays the slightest bit of attention to a Commencement speech and secondly, that George Bernard Shaw was right when he observed that “In order for a speech to be immortal, it need not be eternal.”

So here goes… We – and when I say we, throughout there remarks, I mean those who have gone before you graduates in America – we have left you
some problems, some unfinished business and some real messes. Before reminding you of what all the bad stuff is, remember we have addressed a few things. We’ve done some things right.

Over 200 years ago, we fought against a remote power that was taxing us and telling us what to do without adequate consultation. We won that fight against great odds and created a new nation. Afterwards we had a constitutional convention and created a republic which has ended up closer to a democracy.

As our greatest President reminded us in the midst of our Civil War, our nation “was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” It took that war during which Lincoln uttered that phrase to extend freedom to slaves and the 19th Amendment in 1920 to extend the right to vote to women – moving that part of humanity closer to equality. We are still struggling to match America’s pronouncements about freedom and equality with our practices. But we are trying! And when we don’t succeed there are many who remind us of our failure and their right to do so is guaranteed by the First Amendment to our Constitution.

When our nation was conceived we separated our government into three branches to check unbridled power and in the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, guaranteed individuals certain rights against their usurpation by our government. Later on we recognized that freedom for all was more than individual liberty but also a system of governmental rules that inhibited individual or corporate action to ensure a greater freedom for all. As Judge E. Barrett Prettyman said in a law day speech at the Pentagon several years ago, "In an ordered society of mankind there is no such thing as unlicensed liberty, either of nations or of individuals. Liberty itself is inherently a composite of restraints; it dies when restraints are withdrawn. There is no liberty without order (something we should do well to remember in Iraq). There is no order without systematized restraint. Restraints are the substance with which liberty does not exist. They are the essence of liberty. The only problem of the democratic process is not to strip men of restraints, merely because they are restraints. The great problem is to design a system of restraints which will nurture the maximum development of man's capacities not in a massive glob of faceless animations but as a perfect realization of each separate human mind, soul and body; not in mute, motionless mediation but in flashing, thrashing activity."

We are constantly trying to get it right – our system of restraints. How should power be distributed between the Executive Branch, the Congress and the courts? How to balance individual liberty against the common good? What sort of restraints do we need to protect the environment or public health or economic freedom?

These questions are before us every day in the news as we struggle to give modern meaning to the timeless principles of American democracy.

6/14/2006
William D. Ruckelshaus
UofW Commencement, 06
We have fought and died to preserve our right to sort out these questions ourselves – to define our own concept of liberty. In the bloody century just passed, we aided in the defeat of brutal regimes in Germany (twice) and Japan and helped secure liberty for millions in Europe and Asia.

At the end of the Second World War we taxed American citizens and created the Marshall Plan to assist the defeated, and the victorious but devastated nations in Europe to help them regain their economic footing and once again be guided by hope so essential to the winning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. To do this we asked for more tax dollars from our citizens’ right after World War II when all were paying a marginal tax rate of 90% of their earnings. In today’s dollars the Marshall Plan cost about $130 billion (or about one year in Iraq).

Our government – our system of restraints – has withstood wars, a depression and a series of scandals that caused one President to leave office in disgrace and shook the ruling legitimacy of others.

During the last century, because of a combination of luck, determination and free political and economic systems, that encouraged economic growth and unleashed innovation we now are unrivaled in the world as an economic and military power. And Americans have prospered and until very recently we attracted many to our banner.

So before you are too harsh on those who have gone before, remember we have had our own challenges which we have risen to meet.

With all that, we have left you with some big time, near and long term problems.

More recently, we went from a pinnacle of global support and sympathy after the tragedy of 9/11 to international resentment, resistance and fear unmatched in my lifetime. In my judgment, this is largely because we were right about Afghanistan and wrong about Iraq. As a result, we have jeopardized a good and justifiable decision and squandered the good will of many so necessary for effective international progress toward peace, prosperity and freedom.

Let me be clear, my judgment on the decision to invade Iraq is not a comment on the bravery of the men and women who have implemented that decision or a claim to any superior wisdom about what to do next. We may yet come out of Iraq having advanced the cause of universal peace and freedom. With every fiber of my being, I hope we will, but I fear we will not.

While that terrible struggle understandably occupies our country’s attention here and abroad, other opportunities and problems go unrealized and
Many of these problems will not be successfully brought under social control without American leadership. We are fond of telling ourselves how rich and powerful we -are - American exceptionalism, some call it. If we are exceptional then we should take our wealth and power and use it consistent with our ideals and values. There is only one way a democracy which produces almost one-third of the world’s economy, uses 25% of the world’s energy and has 5% of the world’s people can lead and that is by example.

Iraq has taught us one thing, I hope, and that is we can’t coerce people into accepting freedom or democracy, no matter how hard we try. Neither our military nor our economic might is enough. In fact, the act of coercion itself often runs counter to the acceptance of democracy’s principles by the targeted peoples.

In my view, Americans must participate in the world and certainly defend ourselves if the facts and circumstances warrant but the peoples of the world will only embrace our values and our ideals if our actions match what we say we stand for.

We also must show that democracy and freedom work – that we can cope with our own complexities.

Yes we are rich collectively, but part of our current and apparent wealth is a result of spending more money at the Federal level than we take in through diminishing taxes. Currently we are borrowing primarily from China, India and England to pay for our federal largess. The national debt which now stands at over 8 Trillion dollars will be yours a lot longer than it will be mine. And that is what’s known as generational unfairness.

Our debts are growing domestically at an accelerating rate. In about nine years the money we take in from our social security tax will not meet the promises we have made to our workers to help in their retirement. This Social Security deficit will rapidly grow from 2015 on. Then we have three options – increase taxes, borrow the money or renege on the promises our government has made to our people. Medicare is even more expensive and less sustainable as we look to the future. By 2040, at current rates of growth, these two programs, social security and Medicare (and that is Medicare without the recently granted drug benefit) will have an annual deficit of $4.3 Trillion dollars. This won’t happen but the longer we wait to fix it, the more politically unacceptable our options become.

We have left you with a monumental national energy problem and no national energy policy. The need has been apparent for 35 years and still no national leader will take it on. In my judgment, the best thing that has happened to us since the turn of the Twenty-First Century is that we are paying over $3.00 a gallon for gasoline in most of America - (still less than half what they pay in
Europe). Maybe that rapid rise in the price of gasoline will finally force serious address to the problem of dependence on a fuel that is in the control of unstable, repressive regimes willing and able to fix prices.

We are utterly dependent for oil on places like Russia, Nigeria, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia – not exactly a democratic hit parade. The problem is, so is everyone else – from Europe to the exploding economies of China and India. The result is more demand than there are supply and higher prices.

Fossil fuels cause unacceptably high levels of pollution and contribute to the warming of the planet that cries out for a sensible American policy. So far that cry has been in vain. We have our head in the sands of the Middle East and we need to extract it. America as a consumer of 25% of the world’s energy needs to lead the world in reducing consumption every way we know how. We need to search for environmentally acceptable substitutes by funding the energy research equivalent of a Manhattan Project that led to the development of the Atomic Bomb in World War II. The world needs a sufficient, affordable, clean, reliable and sustainable energy source and America’s future depends on the world meeting these needs. So we must lead and we are not.

These are just a couple of the problems we have left you. I haven’t even mentioned global poverty. One half of the people on this earth – 3 billion people – live on less than two dollars a day. This is morally unacceptable and politically unsustainable. Genocide continues in places like Darfur and the Congo while the free world dithers. Closer to home we have not demonstrated the ability to develop economically without fouling the nest of those critters who share our ecosystem – our beloved Puget Sound is a case in point.

But why should I lay all this on you? This is a happy day – a day of graduation – a day of Commencement.

Let me leave you with one last thought, what really must commence today is your journey as a citizen. We are all fortunate that whether that journey is for religious renewal, financial well being or political purification, our country and its constitution guarantees the right to take it and does not try to dictate its destination. If that guarantee is to continue for you and those who come behind, you must accept your responsibility – as a citizen. Your willing embrace of your responsibility to help guide our country’s future and its government, of, by and for the people is your highest calling as an American. In America, the government isn’t them, it’s us. Our leaders will lead us only where we insist we go. They can help by explaining to us the consequences of our choices or of not making a choice. But it is up to us to understand those choices and demand real solutions from them.

Don’t let them fool you. Don’t fall for the promise that we can spread democracy by marching into a hostile, divided country throw our weight around
and everyone will greet us as liberators. Don’t allow our leaders to say you can have everything you want from our government and we’ll cut your taxes to boot! And insist that we become much less dependent on carbon based fuels by using less, finding newer, cleaner sources of energy and that all of us have to share the pain.

None of these things are impossible if citizens don’t allow them to be. They are not impossible because the single most important thing we who have gone before have bequeathed to you is freedom. In America, you can think whatever you want to think and say whatever you want to say, without fear. In Afghanistan you can be put to death for converting from a Muslim to a Christian. There are still many countries in our world where saying or even being suspected of thinking, the wrong thing can result in loss of freedom or your life.

Not so in America. A few Saturdays back, David Horsey, a cartoonist for Seattle’s Post Intelligencer, one of our morning newspapers, asked his readers to comment in writing to him on the question of whether we would be better off if Al Gore had been elected President in 2000 instead of George Bush. The next week, he prints the answers of his readers to his question.

A week after his question, there were several more or less conventional predictable answers on all sides. One of them struck me. A woman from over on the Olympic Peninsula emailed Horsey, “Let’s face it, we’d be better off with Donald Duck as President than either of those two.”

My point in quoting that woman is not to endorse her position (my personal favorite would be Yosemite Sam) but to feel the wonder, the exhilaration, the pride that she felt free to say what she did. She is not afraid to mock all our leaders. You might question her wisdom or her judgment, but not her freedom to speak her mind any way she wants.

That is a wonderful gift our founders and those who followed have given to all of us and it is still alive for you. If it is to stay alive, for those who would follow you, you have to use this gift carefully and responsibly if possible, but you must use it.

It is that gift of freedom that allows you to be a full participant – a citizen - in the governing of America. Freedom is like a muscle, it will atrophy if not exercised. Its preservation is totally dependent on those who possess it applying its exhilarating power toward ends beneficial to all.

In the first democracy, the Athenian leader, Pericles, 300 years before the time of Christ in his famous funeral oration said, “We do not say that a man who
takes no interest in politics minds his own business. We say he has no business here at all.”

What was true over 2000 years ago in ancient Athens, is true in America today.

You can pass freedom on to those who sit fifty years from now where you sit today. (It was fifty years ago when I sat in your seat.) Freedom can be a greater gift than we have given to you but only if by your use you make it stronger. So don’t despair – exult.

Yes, we’ve left you problems unsolved but how dull the public part of your democratic life would be without them. Debate those problems, revel in them, and rise to meet them. Your life will be richer and more exciting if you embrace the challenges of your age. And one of you as a commencement speaker fifty years from now can say to the graduating class at the University of Washington, we have a world at peace because people followed America’s example. Everyone is now free and they are prosperous because America became truly generous and shared its wealth and know how with the rest of the world and our actions at home and abroad more closely followed our ideals. We Americans are secure and healthy because we have a fully funded health and social security system and we’re producing all the energy we need from farm products, wind, waves and sun and the earth is beginning to cool. I threw that last one in for Al Gore.

I’ll guarantee there’ll be some other problems to pass on, so don’t despair, you will have left some hills to climb so the graduates of that time will have a shot at expanding and strengthening freedom themselves.

I’m confident that’s what will happen because I believe in our country, its ideals, its people and you. Congratulations and good luck!