

**Remarks of the Honorable Warren L. Miller, Chairman
U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad
Commencement Address - Central Michigan University
May 9, 2009, Mt. Pleasant, MI**

President Rao, members of the Board of Trustees and the faculty, Commission Member Rotter, graduates, parents and friends.

It is my honor to stand before you today and to receive this honorary doctorate degree. My heartfelt congratulations to each of the graduates and their families. President Rao, thank you for that kind introduction and your dynamic leadership here at CMU.

The Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad is a truly special agency, and when I was asked to lead it eight years ago, I jumped at the opportunity. Looking back, I can see that my reasons for doing so are telling – and I hope, those reasons may guide you as you leave this campus.

Reason One: The Commission is truly bipartisan. You can't say that about too many ideas, institutions, or people in Washington, DC. Most people tend to associate with others who share their views because it confirms their own opinions. But I have always felt that it's good to work with people with whom you don't always agree. That is why I chose a Democrat who served in the Clinton White House as executive director of the Commission.

Finding common cause with others is a good habit – and I encourage all of you to remember that, no matter your views on the issues of the day.

Reason Two: I believe in public service, pure and simple. I believe any of us who have enjoyed some success has a responsibility to give back. It's not enough to pay your taxes. You have to give your time, your talent, and your energy to your country.

Of course, we are not always prepared to give back. Sometimes, we are not at the right stage in life to do so. When President Kennedy uttered his famous words in January 1961 challenging Americans to do something for their country, I couldn't respond to them right away. A few years earlier, I had buried my father, who died when I was 13. As Kennedy was sworn in, my mother was wasting away with cancer and she died later that year. I was still in high school, so when President Kennedy told me to ask what I could do for my country, I didn't have much to give.

It was a tough time. I didn't have a lot. I went to college, and then law school. There were many long days. During my last year in law school, I would work at a clerkship at the courthouse from 8 am to 5 pm, then go to classes from 6 pm to 8 pm, and then finish my evening studying for the Bar exam. When I learned I had passed the Bar, I felt a rush of exhilaration, and I thought to myself: "Well, at least you won't starve."

That's what an education meant for me then – and I suspect that's what it means for some of you now. You won't starve. But your success in the next few years won't release you from the responsibility to serve. No matter the career you choose, take time to give something back. Serve on a nonprofit board. Volunteer at a school or hospital. Teach or get active in policy. Work for your government, or for an elected representative, or get elected yourself.

Do it, not only because society has already invested in your education -- do it because you will enjoy it. Do it because it will give you an opportunity to lead a meaningful life and to make a difference in the lives of others.

Public service is also incredibly satisfying. My first job after graduating law school was as a federal prosecutor; the pay was meager – about \$8,000 a year -- but the rewards were immense. Years later, my former colleagues from the U.S. attorney's office would get together to reminisce. We all had succeeded materially, but we all agreed that our happiest days were spent in public service.

Which brings me to my third reason for joining the Commission – the work I get to do. When the Nazis and their collaborators destroyed 5,000 Jewish communities across Europe during World War II, they ended lives – but they left behind memories. At the Commission we preserve those memories – especially the memory of what the world did not do when millions of innocent people were tormented and murdered in cold blood. Individuals and nations were bystanders.

The Holocaust presented the greatest moral challenge to humanity – and humanity failed. And as we have seen over and over during your lives, in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Sudan – humanity continues to fail moral challenges. If you take away anything from my remarks today, I implore you – when you witness discrimination or learn of injustice – do not be a bystander.

In my office, I have a photo of a family near my desk. A father, a mother, and two children. One of the children is in a baby carriage. They are out for a walk, wearing their best clothes. Their last name was Bochner. I don't know much more about them. I know they were from a town in Poland called Oswiecim. And I know that they were killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

I keep that photo as a reminder. Those people – they were counting on me to force the world to remember what happened. They were counting on me to get memorials built at the death camps and the massacre sites. To clean up and repair old cemeteries and places of worship – abandoned by communities that no longer existed. They were counting on me to cajole, negotiate with, and berate foreign governments into recognizing the evil that was done on their own soil, by their own people, decades ago. And to make sure it would never happen again.

I often travel to countries in Eastern Europe, where some Jews still live. I am greeted with thanks, even surprise. They are shocked that an official representing the President of the United States would take the time to care about their little villages, their cemeteries, their memorials. One small elderly woman came up to me

after a speech and said: "I was one of Mengele's children." This woman was once a little girl, and she and her twin sister were at the mercy of the notorious Josef Mengele, a Nazi doctor who did horrific experiments on Jewish children at Auschwitz. His crimes were unspeakable. Very few survived him. This woman did. She was sobbing, and she put her arms around my waist and kept saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I had to turn away, because I was starting to cry.

Mengele, who ruled over the lives and was complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands, did not outlive this little old woman. He did not erase her from this earth. And he could not erase the memory of those whose lives he took. At the Heritage Commission, we see Mengele – and the others who still today distort history and perpetuate the lies of anti-Semitism and other types of bigotry – as our enemy.

Each success we have, no matter how incremental, is like another victory over Mengele, and each success helps his victims find some measure of justice. Just like that little old woman. It is my job to be the voice of that woman, of the Bochners, and of millions like them, even when their voices were silenced. It is my job – and my honor.

There were 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. 1.5 million who were children – enough to fill this arena more than 200 times over. Those children were not allowed a chance to do what you are doing today – celebrating your educational accomplishments with your families and friends. In fact, most were denied not only an education, but even the dignity of a marked grave. I proudly accept this honorary degree in their memory.

So, you can see, that even on my toughest days as chairman, it doesn't take much for me to stay inspired. All I have to do is look at that picture of that family, out for a stroll in a quiet village in Poland.

I look at that picture frequently. Some mornings, I wake up with a fresh idea on how I can do one more thing to help give that family a voice. It is a wonderful privilege of public service to have the opportunity to help others. Some day, each of you will have your chance.

Don't pass up that opportunity. Don't look away. People are counting on you. Even people without a voice.

Many thanks, congratulations, good luck, and may God bless America.