

I'm going to indulge in a bit of cross-pollination from other art forms this afternoon (note that comment is based on the assumption that commencement remarks by the president *are* a form of art...that remains to be seen). Several genres of contemporary music – notably hip-hop and electro – make extensive use of what they call “sampling,” taking bits and pieces of other people’s recorded music and inserting them into their own music. Those bits and pieces then come to mean new things as they are bent and twisted into a new structural context. It’s actually a technique that’s been used in all the arts for centuries, as visual artists, poets and novelists, choreographers and composers in a sense “quote” their predecessors for a variety of reasons – ranging from the aesthetic to the philosophical.

My faculty and staff friends know that in my commencement remarks in my previous six years at Drake, I have developed a tradition of “sampling” 19th century Russian writers (that’s my academic field) – hoping perhaps that my audience will mistake their wisdom for mine (even though I’m careful about identifying my sources). This afternoon I’m going to depart culturally from that tradition, and “sample” the work of two contemporary non-Russians, both of whom happen to be political analysts and correspondents: Justin Webb, who is BBC’s chief correspondent in Washington, and Joe Klein, who these days is a political columnist for *Time Magazine*. The reason that I am doing this is because I’ve heard them both speak in the past two months – Webb at the Drake Law School’s Supreme Court Banquet, and Klein in an hour long interview with Tim Russert on CNBC last week. I was intrigued that both of them were focusing on the same theme from quite different perspectives – and I find the theme quite disconcerting.

Webb, as a European looking from the outside at American democracy, is struck by the fact that – from his perspective – we hold neither our politicians nor our media accountable. He led the audience through an interesting comparison of Europeans’ practice of democracy and freedom, in contrast to what he sees as the American version. According to Webb, in America we have immense freedom, and immense power as a result of that freedom – the power to chose through the democratic process what issues are important to us, and to chose the people who will address those issues in the way that we want them to. But from Webb’s perspective, we are squandering that freedom. We are not demanding that our politicians speak to us about the vital issues that define our future in a manner that is nuanced, informed, and meaningful, we are not demanding that they have a vision of where this nation should go and what we need to do to get there. We are not holding our politicians *accountable*.

Webb isn’t any easier on his colleagues in the journalism profession, as he points out that the media are failing in their responsibility as well. It is the job of the

media, he noted, to help us hold our politicians accountable – to ask them in public the difficult and troubling questions, and to demand that they answer them. But they're not doing that – they're allowing what passes for political discourse to deteriorate into sound bites, hyperbole, and name-calling. Political debates – whether among politicians or among the talking heads of the media – are all starting to look like the Jerry Springer show (that's my uncharitable view – not Webb's).

Joe Klein has just published a book entitled: *Politics Lost : How American Democracy Was Trivialized By People Who Think You're Stupid*. Klein's thesis is analogous to what Webb told us at the Supreme Court Banquet: we are not holding our politicians accountable, and we are allowing them to treat us as if we are idiots. We allow them to say things to us in public that no one in this room, as you receive your advanced degree, would find acceptable in terms of accuracy, veracity, and depth of thought. Behind this thesis is Klein's belief that we are allowing our politicians to define the terms of political discourse *not* on the basis of what is important to the future of this country, but on the basis of what their consultants, focus groups, and survey research tell them will keep them in power. We are not demanding that our leaders take bold and creative positions on things that will improve our lives – we are allowing them to corral us into voting blocks on the basis of issues that appeal to our self-interest rather than the national interest.

So why am I standing before you this afternoon, sampling Justin Webb and Joe Klein. Because if you fulfill the promise and the expectation of your professional education at Drake University, you will become leaders in your organizations, in your communities, in your professions, in your schools, and perhaps – some of you – in elected positions. A document that we created at Drake 18 months ago, called the *Mission Explication*. It lays out in great detail what we believe are the outcomes of a Drake University education, and among those outcomes it says that Drake graduates are "reflective practitioners" in their chosen professions, acting "to maintain professional practices that are consistent with their ethical judgment and stewardship responsibilities," and that they "demonstrate the capacity to raise questions about the relationship of their profession to ethical and civic issues."

You are the people to whom others will look for wisdom, guidance and encouragement, and for examples of what it means to be citizens in this democracy. So I would ask you ask you take this next step in your lives to make *accountability* a central part of who you are, what you do, and what you demand of the others who would lead us. I would ask you to make sure that you hold *yourselves* accountable to those with whom you work and whom you will serve, and I ask that you take a role in demonstrating to our politicians and our media

that we are not as stupid as they apparently think we are. This country needs inspired, visionary, thoughtful, informed, creative, selfless and committed leadership at every level. I hope that you will help ensure that we have it.

We thank you for becoming part of the Drake University family, and wish you the very best of luck as you go forward.