First of all, of course, congratulations are in order. You have worked very hard and as a result, you are the proud owners of a degree that is very valuable to you and very valuable to your family and to your community.

Today is a day when you deserve to celebrate, and you deserve to revel in your significant achievement. But when you get done with the photos and the parties and the graduation gifts, you will turn your attention back to the every-day important things in life: your loved ones, your careers. When you go back to that post-graduation reality, I have one little thing to ask of you.

Will you please save the world?

Those of us who graduated some time ago have left a lot of jobs undone, and your skills and your knowledge can be just the ticket to making things right. I’m going to ask you to apply your understanding of history and logic and language and social science to take care of a few undone matters.

Let me tell you what jobs I’m talking about:

First job: Please return the Bill of Rights to the United States government. Because it seems like we have misplaced it for a few years.

Obviously, it is my business at the ICLU to defend civil liberties, and that is notoriously hard to do in a time of war, when claims of national security seem more important than personal freedom and liberty. In U.S. history, we had supposed national security concerns to blame for the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which just a decade after the First Amendment was adopted made it a crime to criticize the government.

National security was given as the reason for the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in the Civil War. National security supposedly made it obvious that we had to have massive imprisonment of immigrants during World War I, and then the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans in World War II. National security during the McCarthy era and beyond, the fear of Communism, was the justification for the federal government to spy...
on and intimidate civil rights leaders, up to and including Dr. Martin Luther
King, Jr.

All in the name of national security. And all aimed usually at the most
powerless among us: the immigrants, the poor, the politically or religiously
unpopular.

Graduates, I’m afraid that we your predecessors haven’t learned much
from that history. Because now we have national security cited as
justification for, in the weeks after 9/11, 2000 Muslim-American men
rounded up and thrown into prisons, none of whom were ever charged with
any crime connected to 9/11 or terrorism at all.

Now we have the USA Patriot Act, which gives federal officials
unprecedented ability to look at your and my email accounts, your and my
bank records and your and my phone records without the need for a warrant
or even suspicion that we committed a crime.

And now we have the abuses of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan,
where dozens were murdered and hundreds more tortured in the name of the
United States, yet the highest officials responsible have not even been fired,
much less charged with crimes.

We went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan to free those countries from
Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, and many brave men and women lost their
lives as a result. We went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan to rid the world of
governments that crushed those who disagreed with them and tortured their
enemies. We owe it to those who fight and even die for the principles of
freedom to have outrage over the fact that now we have protesters harassed
and arrested on the streets of Indiana, religious minorities being
marginalized and the very same torture chambers used by the tyrants, like
Abu Ghreib prison, being used to brutalize OUR enemies.

In the United States, we don’t have a common ethnic background, nor
a common religion. Instead, we share a common commitment to freedom
and liberty as they are set out in the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution.
But now, too often, we are mocking those values in front of the whole world.

Can you fix these things, please? Because this is all being done in your
name, on the premise that you think this makes you and me safer. So I’m
asking you to put your liberal arts degree, to work and invoke the lessons of
history that shows the mistakes we can avoid. Quote Benjamin Franklin,
“They that give up essential liberty to obtain temporary safety deserve
neither liberty nor safety” or, more disturbingly, the observation of Hermann
Goering, second in command to Hitler: "People can always be brought to
the bidding of the leaders...All you have to do is tell them they're being
attacked and denounce the pacifists for a lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

Can you explain to your elected officials and your fellow citizens that we can be, in fact we MUST be, both safe AND free, even during the seemingly perpetual War on Terrorism?

Speaking of war, your second job for your post-graduation to-do list: Please do something about the fact that violence seems to be our favorite way of solving problems these days, both in the streets of Indianapolis and in our global communities. Diplomacy is seen as weak, both in dealing with the guy who cuts you off on I-465 and the country that opposes your trade policies. As a result, U.S. teenagers are more likely to die a violent death than youth in any other developed country, and the U.S. military budget is the highest it has been in half a century, far, far more than any other country in the world.

I have to confess that this particular problem has been sitting around on this to-do list for awhile. You can go back to President Dwight Eisenhower, who was also a five-star general, saying, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

So, take care of that for us, will you?

Speaking of poverty, the third job on your to-do list. It is the last, but certainly not least. Solve global poverty. That sounds like a lot to do after you have your graduation cake, doesn’t it? But the true tragedy of global poverty is that it IS so solvable. We have the resources and the technology to feed the world and move people from all around the globe to self-sufficiency. We in the wealthy nations just have to WANT to do that.

I think people DO want to help their brothers and sisters around the globe. Surveys show that most Americans believe that the United States, the richest country in the world, gives 20% of our federal budget to foreign aid. But that is far, far from the truth. We actually give less than 1% of our budget to foreign aid, the lowest of any wealthy country. It is going to take reasoned college graduates like you to tell your fellow citizens that for $1 a
day, for example, we can keep HIV patients alive and healthy in sub-
Saharan Africa.

How are you going to do that? Well, most of you took a speech class,
right? Some of you are communication majors. All of you have been trained
in logic and persuasion. So you remember that it is better to use an
illustration than a mere statistic. And even as chilling a statistic as the fact
that 20,000 people will die today because they can’t pay for food or
medicine—20,000 people died today because they are poor—even a number
like that may be hard to understand. And most of these condemned people
are half a world away, so it is difficult to comprehend their misery.

So you use your liberal arts skills to figure out a way to illustrate that
number. You could say that right now, as we gather here, a Kenyan mother
just died of treatable AIDS. Wait 4 seconds. A Malawi teenager just died of
preventable malaria. 2. 3. 4. A child in the Sudan just died of malnutrition in
his mother’s arms. 2. 3. 4. Another person died of poverty. And another.
And another.

Or you could say that today’s death toll is the equivalent of 40 747’s
plunging to earth, killing all aboard. And the same thing is going to happen
tomorrow. And the next.

It doesn’t have to be this way, but it is going to take educated people
like you to present this global tragedy in ways that move the luckier people
to help, and to demand that our government help us do what we can to help.

So that’s your list. It is a lot to ask for, I’ll grant you. But you have the
tools to complete your to-do list.

First of all, you live in the wealthiest country in the world, which is
also, luckily enough, a democracy. As Winston Churchill said, “Democracy
is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been
tried.” So you can petition your lawmakers to help you fix these problems.
And if you get enough of your friends to help you, the job will get done.

As Dean White mentioned to you, I have some background in politics.
And while I have the utmost respect for how hard elected officials work and
how smart most of them are, I have a secret to tell you: You can push them
around! Elected officials are professional popularity contest winners, and
they will not stand in the way of the will of the people. The day that 51% of
the people of the U.S. believe the Patriot Act should be rewritten or that we should cut the military budget and devote the funds to ending global poverty, it is a done deal. A done deal.

Another advantage is that you live in a country with a culture of caring. There are dozens of nonprofit groups tackling the problems of justice and poverty, just waiting for help from a smart graduate like you. You live in a country with a diverse religious culture devoted to caring for the least among us, from the Christians’ Sermon on the Mount to Zakat, the charitable fourth pillar of Islam; the Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam*, “healing the world;” the charity in the Hindu concept of Sewa, and so on and so on.

And finally, but most importantly, you have enormous capability right inside your own cap and gown. You really did something special today: Your degree brings you respect, and it should. Your degree brings you power, and it should. But my point I would like to leave you with today is that your degree also brings you responsibility, and it should. Because you can apply your skills in anthropology, communications, economics, English, geography, history, philosophy, political science, religion, sociology and language to change the world for the better.

You can do this. We need you to do this. Heck, we long-ago graduates may even have enough gas left in the tank to help you do this. So congratulations right now for this significant achievement today, and congratulations in advance for all that you are GOING to do to fix the mess we are leaving you, and make the world a place filled with freedom, peace and justice.

Thank you and congratulations.