

George Washington University
Commencement Speeches
May 21, 2017
(transcript as delivered)

Howard Goodison II, graduate: President Knapp, I am honored to present to you Martin Baron for the degree of Doctor of Public Service, *honoris causa*.

GW President Steven Knapp: You were born and raised in Tampa, Florida. You earned Bachelor of Arts and Master of Business Administration degrees simultaneously from Lehigh University in 1976 and returned to Florida to begin your journalism career. You started as a state reporter and later a business writer for The Miami Herald. In 1979, you joined The Los Angeles Times, where you became business editor and editor of the newspaper's Orange County edition. You went on to hold top editing positions at The New York Times and The Miami Herald. While you were at The Miami Herald, the newspaper won the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the federal raid to recover Elián González, a Cuban boy who was at the center of a famous immigration and custody dispute.

In 2001, you joined The Boston Globe as executive editor. Under your leadership, the newspaper investigated the concealment of widespread sexual abuse by Catholic priests. The paper's investigative reporting was later portrayed in the Academy Award-winning film "Spotlight." You spent more than 11 years at the Globe, and, during that time, the newspaper won six Pulitzer Prizes -- for public service, explanatory journalism, national reporting and criticism.

Currently, you are the executive editor of The Washington Post, where you oversee a staff of more than 700 journalists who produce the paper's print and digital content. Under your management, the newsroom has earned five Pulitzer Prizes since 2013 for coverage of secret surveillance by the National Security Agency, reporting on the prevalence of food stamps in post-recession America, the disclosure of security lapses in the U.S. Secret Service, a project detailing every killing by a police officer in the United States in 2015 and an examination of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's charitable giving. Former Washington Post publisher Katharine Weymouth called you "one of the finest editors, arguably, in the world." Your career has been defined by high-impact investigative journalism. Among your many accolades in recognition of your integrity and leadership, you were named Editor of the Year in 2001 by Editor & Publisher magazine and Editor of the Year in 2004 by the National Press Foundation. Martin Baron, in recognition of all the foregoing, the George Washington University proudly confers upon you the degree of Doctor of Public Service, *honoris causa*, with all the rights, duties and privileges pertaining thereto.

Martin Baron, executive editor, The Washington Post: First of all, congratulations to all of today's graduates.

I feel I need to make a special shoutout to one graduate in particular, Jordi Bloom.

I think Jordi will agree with this, that he is actually graduating here today proves that miracles do happen.

Now, Jordi's father, who is here with his wife Jeanie (sp), has been a dear friend of mine since we worked on the college paper together, and he would like me to tell you that he is responsible for my every achievement.

So there, I told you.

President Knapp, trustees of George Washington University, I am grateful to you and the entire university community for this great honor. I hope this is seen as recognition not only for my career but for the important and difficult work of journalists everywhere.

Although journalists face threats and pressures in this country, the United States thankfully still enjoys a free and vigorous press.

In too many other countries, we can see what happens when journalism comes under malicious assault from government and other powerful interests. In Turkey, where hundreds of journalists have been jailed solely for doing their work with a spirit of independence. In Russia, where hopes of a flourishing free press have been systematically extinguished, giving government tight and manipulative control over information.

In Venezuela, where once vigorous media have been crushed under the weight of fines, sham prosecutions and government engineered financial duress. These and other countries have taken a proven path -- to control your citizens, you first control the press. Here in the United States, the press faces escalating pressures that have their origin just down the road.

The president has called those of us in the press every name in the book, most recently "enemy of the American people." The latest evidence is that he pressures the FBI director to investigate leaks with the goal of jailing journalists. The president has said that he is at war with the media. We are not at war. We are at work.

We are doing jobs inspired by the First Amendment, which was drafted by our nation's founders with this fundamental idea -- that the press, and all citizens, should hold government to account. So that is what my colleagues in journalism and I intend to do.

A career of four decades has taught me that it is the right thing to do, the only ethical thing to do if our democracy is to remain strong. Thank you for honoring me here today and for honoring the work of my profession.

Antonia Keutzer, graduate: President Knapp, I am honored to present to you Lieutenant General Nadja West for the degree of Doctor of Public Service, *honoris causa*.

GW President Steven Knapp: You grew up the youngest of 12 adopted children. Your mother was a journalist and activist, and your father's 33-year career in the military inspired you—along with nine of your siblings—to join the U.S. Army. You followed in one of your brother's footsteps to the U.S. Military Academy. In 1982, you earned a bachelor's degree in engineering. Becoming a member of just the third graduating class in West Point history that included women. You earned an M.D. from George Washington's School of Medicine and Health Sciences in 1988 and completed residencies in family medicine and dermatology.

You have served in military medical posts around the world. In 1990, while still a medical resident, you were deployed to Saudi Arabia and Iraq during Operation Desert Shield. You later served as chief of the dermatology service at Heidelberg Army Hospital and division surgeon of the 1st Armored Division in Germany. While serving in Germany, you were deployed to the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo. After your tenure in Germany, you were named chief of the Department of Medicine and Dermatology Service at 121st General Hospital in Seoul, South Korea. In the United States, you held leadership positions in Army hospitals and medical centers in Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina. You returned to Washington to serve as joint staff surgeon at the Pentagon, where you were the chief medical adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and coordinated all health services programs, including operational medicine and force health protection.

In 2015, after confirmation by the Senate, you became the 44th surgeon general of the U.S. Army and commanding general of the U.S. Army medical command. In that role, you oversee the Army's 150,000 medical service members and civilians as well as its hospitals and clinics. And as a three-star general, you are the highest-ranking African-American woman in the history of the U.S. Army and the highest-ranking woman. And the highest-ranking woman ever to graduate from West Point.

Among your many awards and decorations, you have received the Distinguished Service Medal, Defense Superior Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal and NATO Medal. You are a member of the Order of Military Medical Merit and a fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Nadja Y. West, in recognition of all the foregoing, the George Washington University proudly confers upon you the degree of Doctor of Public Service, *honoris causa*, with all the rights, duties and privileges pertaining thereto.

Lt. Gen. Nadja West, U.S. Army: Wow, what an honor.

GW President Steven Knapp -- Go Army.

Lt. Gen. Nadja West, U.S. Army: That's right.

President Knapp, distinguished guests, Senator Duckworth and friends of George Washington University, if you had asked me when I graduated from the School of Medicine and Health Sciences almost 30 years ago if I thought I would ever be considered for such a tremendous honor as this, from such a great and distinguished university, I would have responded with much skepticism and indeed much laughter. Especially when considering the caliber of my colleagues who have also received this recognition today and those who have been so honored in the past. But I am truly honored, humbled and grateful to accept it on behalf of all of the individuals and experiences that have shaped me into the physician and leader that I have become today. I would like to thank my family, who set the example and instilled strong faith, values and the work ethic that started me on my path, for taking a chance on an orphan that could have wandered off the face of the earth unknown but instead was brought into a loving family that gave me such opportunity.

I would also like to acknowledge the formation I received from West Point on what it means to be an American soldier and the strong foundation that the George Washington School of Health Sciences and Medicine provided in the art of being a compassionate healer. I know that without that foundation, that the many patients, mentors, colleagues and friends had to build on, I would not be here today accepting this very generous honor and recognition.

And one thing I would like to leave with you, the class of 2017, you heard your colleague give that beautiful speech and beautiful remarks about welcoming.

Phenomenal.

Let's give her another hand.

That was absolutely phenomenal.

But I would like to challenge you also just to think about that.

When you think, when you're starting on the foundation today in 2017, I remember sitting in seats similar to you, not thinking I would ever be able to achieve anything like this in my wildest imaginations.

So I would challenge each one of you, why not you?

If I can do it with my humble beginning, you can do anything that you put your mind to, and I challenge you to do that for the future.

Again, thank you so much.

Congratulations to you and your families.

GW President Steven Knapp: Our final honorary degree recipient will be introduced by Tommy Elms, who graduates today with a Bachelor of Arts in Geography from the Columbian College of Arts and sciences.

[Applause]

And who also minored in Geographical Information Science and Public Health. A United States Navy veteran -- Tommy has served as the Vice President of GW Veterans for the past 2 1/2 years. Tommy will be continuing his education at GW by pursuing a Master of Science in Geography.

Tommy Elms, graduate: President Knapp, I am honored to present to you the Honorable Ladda Tammy Duckworth, United States Senator.

From the state of Illinois, for the degree of Doctor of Public Service, honoris causa.

GW President Steven Knapp: You were born in Bangkok, Thailand, and spent much of your childhood in Southeast Asia. You moved to Hawaii when you were in high school, and you earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Hawaii, a master's

degree in international affairs from the George Washington University and a Ph.D. in human services from Capella University. You are an Iraq War veteran, a Purple Heart recipient and one of the first women in the U.S. Army to fly combat missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

You continued to serve in the Reserve Forces for a total of 23 years before retiring from military service in 2014 at the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 2004, you deployed to Iraq as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot for the Illinois Army National Guard. On November 12, 2004, your helicopter was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, and you suffered severe injuries.

Along with the Purple Heart, you were honored with the Air Medal and the Combat Action Badge. You spent the next year recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where you quickly became an advocate for your fellow soldiers and testified before Congress about caring for veterans and wounded warriors. After your recovery, you became director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and you worked to create a tax credit for employers who hired veterans, establish a 24/7 veterans crisis hotline and develop programs to improve veterans' access to housing and health care.

In 2009, President Barack Obama appointed you as assistant secretary of Veterans Affairs. At the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, you coordinated a joint initiative with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to end veteran homelessness. You also created the Office of Online Communications and worked to address the challenges faced by Native American and female veterans. Your dedication to serving others was recognized that year with the George Washington University's inaugural Colin Powell Public Service Award. In 2012, you were elected to represent Illinois's 8th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, where you served for two terms. In the House, you were an advocate for working families and job creation. You introduced bills to ensure that new mothers have access to safe and clean lactation rooms in airports and to address college debt, lead in drinking water and gaps in the skills of the American workforce.

Through your service on the House Armed Services Committee and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, you introduced and helped pass legislation to reduce veteran suicide, improve VA mental health services and help returning veterans find private sector jobs.

In 2016, you were elected to the United States Senate, where you advocate for practical solutions to improve the lives of your constituents and all Americans, including rebuilding infrastructure, keeping water systems safe and growing manufacturing jobs. You have also supported minority-owned small businesses and efforts to make college more affordable. And you have continued. You have continued your lifelong mission of supporting, protecting and keeping the promises made to our veterans. From your military service to your tireless advocacy on behalf of veterans, women and families, you have dedicated your life to serving your country.

You embody a spirit of service and sacrifice that has inspired our many GW veterans and our university as a whole. Ladda Tammy Duckworth, in recognition of all the foregoing, the George Washington University proudly confers upon you the degree of

Doctor of Public Service, *honoris causa*, with all the rights, duties and privileges pertaining thereto.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you your commencement speaker, United States senator and George Washington doctor, Tammy Duckworth.

Sen. Tammy Duckworth: Thank you! Thank you all so much! Congratulations, class of 2017! And, of course, congratulations to all of the parents, sisters, brothers and family members who – loved ones, children – who made this day possible. The last time I was at one of these, I was down there as a student.

It looks a lot different from up here! To the faculty, staff, students, and the entire GW community, thank you for this honorary degree and for inviting me to speak to you.

It's such an unexpected honor, and I hope I'm able to live up to the standards set by the previous speakers. You know, no one special like Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama or my colleague Cory Booker.

It can't be that tough, right? And to President Knapp, thank you for your service to GW over the last decade. I really want you to pay close attention here, Mr. President -- not only because I have a lot to say about all the work you've done to make this university a better place but also because I've been asked by some students to distract you for a few minutes as they try to kidnap your dog Ruffles, who I hear is quite the celebrity.

In fact, go, go, go.

Go get her.

We're going to keep her.

Mr. President, you get this one.

I'm sure it's not the first commencement Ruffles has come to. Seriously, though, we are here at a crucial time in our nation's history.

Every day we are reminded of the challenges and threats that we face abroad and here at home. Our infrastructure is crumbling, student debt is sky rocketing. In fact, there is more student debt held in this country than there is credit card debt, over \$1.3 trillion. And we still have troops in harm's way all around the globe.

Many of you might feel like we're engaged in a battle for the heart and soul of our nation.

There are leaders in Washington with a dark vision for our future, who will say anything, criticize anyone and everything just to further their own self-interests, seemingly without regard for what's best for our people and for our nation.

The thoughtful, principled leaders once common in Congress and the White House, the kind of leaders who fought over policies during the day, compromised, and then shared a drink together as friends in the evening, those kinds of leaders today are too often

drowned out by the loudest voice in the room, whether or not that voice has a plan or even cares to string together a coherent sentence while they're spewing hate.

It's in that environment that I've spent a lot of time thinking about what I wanted to say today. Thinking about what I wanted you to take away from your time at GW and hopefully from this address.

My message to you, wherever you fall on the political spectrum, is to get involved, not discouraged. The less well-known President Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, once said when explaining what it meant to be a citizen, quote, "it is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and short coming."

Think about that -- there is no effort without error and shortcoming. It's really just an eloquent way of saying don't be afraid of failure. Don't be afraid of being embarrassed or of being criticized. Just try get into the arena. Successful people didn't make it because they never failed, they made it because they never gave up. When you don't get that job you really, really wanted, see it as an opportunity to find something better for yourself. If you weren't happy with the outcome of last year's election, think of it as a chance to get involved in your community as a catalyst for the change you want to make.

The point is you need to get into the arena, and then you need to stay there and make your voice heard.

When I arrived at GW, becoming a helicopter pilot or a United States senator were not a part of my wildest dreams. I came here because I wanted to be a Foreign Service officer, and I knew that there was no better place to prepare for the Foreign Service than the George Washington University.

So with the help of student loans, grants, a full-time job, I enrolled in the Elliott School.

When I got to my classes, I got to know servicemen and women and veterans from all different backgrounds, who were also student veterans. I always knew I wanted to serve my country, but my classmates at GW helped expand my vision of what that service could look like. These were individuals who were so unapologetically patriotic but also weren't afraid to think critically and criticize our government and how our nation conducts itself in the world. They helped me understand that our nation's strength doesn't just come from tanks and guns and helicopters -- although I do love them, and personally, I find helicopters sexy.

You do too, right?

He used to fix Black Hawks.

I used to break Black Hawks.

So it's a symbiotic relationship.

But that strength also comes from a strong diplomatic relationship around the world and a willingness to engage with those who are different from us.

Here at GW, I was surrounded by servicemen and women and veterans, and they showed me that serving in uniform and supporting diplomacy were not mutually exclusive.

Then it came time for me to decide what my own service would look like.

I'd just been laid off from my job because the company I worked for had been sold, and I chose to take that job loss as an opportunity to do something really different.

At that point -- I'm aging myself -- but at that point, the Berlin wall was falling, the Gulf War had began, and it became clear that joining the Army was a way that I could serve this nation that I love during a critical time.

So off I went to basic training. Woop!

I wasn't sure where it would take me, but I knew I had a duty to serve my nation. I wanted to think I had everything figured out, but there was no way I could have known how things would play out. I couldn't have imagined the challenges I would face -- challenges in the military, in Congress, or as a new mom. But that's the thing -- none of us can ever figure out and predict what's going to happen. We can't predict our successes or our failures. We can only control how we react to them.

When you're in the arena, failure is part of the process. Part of the success. But these failures, these challenges, aren't what define us. We are defined by how we respond and our perseverance.

Don't get me wrong.

It's not easy. It's not easy to face rejection, to face failure, to feel defeated by forces beyond your control. I've had plenty of moments when I thought of giving up, moments when I knew I had been defeated. November 12, 2004, is my "Alive Day." It was the day I almost died, but didn't.

It was a good day for me. I was flying high that day over Iraq in my Black Hawk with the best crew out there. Then, without warning, an RPG tore through the cockpit of my aircraft. It was a lucky shot. For the bad guys.

One of my legs was vaporized, and the other amputated by my instrument panel. The explosion blew off the entire back of my right arm. I was quite literally in pieces. My pilot-in-command managed to land our aircraft, and they started pulling out the wounded. They thought I was dead at first, but when they tried to give medical attention to one of my crew members, Chris, Sergeant Fierce -- that's a great name for an NCO, right?

Sergeant Fierce.

Sergeant Fierce refused help and told them to help me instead. He saw that I was still bleeding and thought maybe, just maybe, her heart was still beating.

He did what every troop in combat is willing to do without thinking, even if they hope they never have to do it -- he refused treatment for himself to save someone else. My buddies wouldn't give up on me. They refused to leave me behind.

It was a hard day for me and a harder day for my crew. They picked me up, covered in my blood and tissue, as they tried to keep my body intact. If I didn't make it, they knew they could at least return what was left of me to my family.

But they weren't going to leave me behind in that dusty field in Iraq.

But it was a good day for me because good men saved me, and I lived.

I survived to serve my nation again.

The days, weeks, and months that followed were some of the hardest I've ever endured. But in those most challenging moments, my life's mission couldn't have been more clear. I knew from that moment on I would spend every single day of the rest of my life trying to honor the courage and sacrifice of my buddies who saved me.

So with the help of my family, friends and fellow service members at Walter Reed, I began my recovery. It was anything but easy. Tasks like picking up a pencil -- or even just sitting up without passing out -- were no longer simple. At first, it was unclear how I would lead a regular life, let alone continue to serve my nation in uniform. I can't tell you how disappointed I was when they told me I couldn't go back to serve in my helicopter battalion. Being separated from my buddies ripped my core identity out, just as if that RPG ripped out my heart too when it took my legs.

But after every time that I couldn't do something, after every day when I didn't know how I would make it to the next, I made the choice not to give up.

It wasn't a choice really. Giving up would have been a betrayal of the effort my buddies put into saving me on that day, and I will never, ever betray them. Then one day, Senator Dick Durbin from my home state of Illinois invited me to be his guest at President Bush's State of the Union address. Even though I was just a few weeks into my recovery, I wanted to see the democracy that I had given up my legs -- and my career as an Army helicopter pilot -- to protect. Senator Durbin also made a foolish mistake when he gave me his business card, and he wrote his personal cell phone number on the back.

Senator 101.

Don't do that.

Because I used that phone number a lot. I figured if I had this chance to speak to a United States Senator about the problems my buddies at Walter Reed faced every day, I couldn't pass it up. I wanted to make it clear to all who lead this nation -- and really to anyone who would listen -- just what a dear price we pay when we send our troops into

harm's way. I got back in the arena. I may have been broken, but I could still be an Army officer. I could still take care of my troops. Maybe I was done serving in combat, but I could see the next step in my life's path because it meant that I could serve my fellow veterans. After I got out of Walter Reed, I went to the VA, I ran for Congress and then I won my seat in the Senate.

Thank you. So now, I get to bug Dick Durbin in person every single day.

And I have all his phone numbers. My life since my Black Hawk was shot out of the sky has been incredible -- and improbable. There have been highs, and there have been unbelievable lows, over the last 12 years, but one thing has always remained constant. Every time I got knocked down, I got back up. I dusted myself off, and I got back in the arena -- when my face had literally been marred with dust and sweat and blood. And I am so glad that I did. My story has a few years on it more than you do.

But I'm really here to tell you that it's not that different from any of you.

I've been in that audience.

I know each and every one of you can get into the arena too. Have already gotten into the arena as well, which is good because our nation needs you now perhaps more than ever. You've been training for it, but now you need to step up.

You can be our nation's next generation of leaders. Luckily, as GW grads, you already have a head start on many of your peers. Over and over, the students of GW have proven to be some of the most civically engaged students in the nation, showing leadership in and out of the political arena.

GW students and graduates show their commitments to serving others, to making sacrifices in order to serve something bigger than themselves every single day, day in and day out.

In the past year alone, in just one year, GW students have donated over 700,000 hours of service in local communities and around the world to improve our environment, our education system and open up spaces for minority voices. Many of you take an active role in government, at both the local level and the national level -- including two of you who interned in my office this semester.

So Kathleen Hunt and Steven, thank you both for all the help. I don't know if I just embarrassed you.

A lot of GW students also volunteer to serve their nation in uniform, just as they did while I was here. There are over 450 service members and veterans in the Class of 2017 alone.

I'll ask all of you to stand up, as well as those in the audience who are veterans.

Stand up and be recognized, veterans!

I thank each of you. And your families for your service and sacrifice.

Every single graduate here today has something to be proud of. You also have a lot to be thankful for. As GW grads, you have been given opportunities millions of Americans will never know, and this degree will continue to open up new experiences that you can't imagine yet. Don't lose sight of the good fortune and luck that helped you get here. Some of you may have been lucky enough to afford tuition here without any help, but even if you worked three jobs, took out student loans and earned scholarships just to get to class, there are people out there who aren't as lucky. I guess what I'm saying is, to quote Kendrick Lamar -- whose real last name is Duckworth, by the way -- be humble.

Be humble.

I can't quote the rest of the lyrics on this stage. There are cameras.

The rest of you all will look it up and know what I'm talking about.

It's a good single, man.

Because, in all seriousness, as GW graduates, you will have access to resources and opportunities that people who are simply less lucky than you won't have. But if you don't lose sight of those who are less fortunate, you can go out and make a difference. I hope that you continue the work you've already started as public servants, as activists, as entrepreneurs, as scientists, as journalists.

Keep making the changes and be those change makers well into the future. It's your turn now, but you actually have to do it yourselves. Earning your diplomas wasn't easy.

I know you struggled mightily during your time here, but you made it. And I want you to remember this moment, the tenacity, the diligence, the work ethic and the dedication it took for you to get here. You have that within you. Those qualities and the critical thinking skills that you learn here, that you learned here at this school, will take you far. But there will be hard times.

And your journey will not be without its challenges. The struggles you will face in life from here on out may be harder than any you faced on campus, but you will only get better at reacting to them. You will only get better at reacting and overcoming whatever it is that's in your path.

Remember that President Roosevelt's words that there is no effort without error and shortcoming. There will be moments when you are discouraged. There will be times when you don't get the job you thought you wanted or moments when paying off that student debt feels impossible. Trust me, I get it.

I'm still paying off my student loan debt.

I'm not kidding.

Not all from GW though.

I got a Ph.D. as well.

So there's more. There will be hard times when you get hurt or lose someone close to you. But those challenges, those struggles, those are what make success possible. We are not successful in spite of our challenges. We are successful because of our will to overcome them.

President Roosevelt understood that well. In his mind, the credit belongs to people who actually do things, people who -- and I'm quoting him again -- "at best know the triumph of high achievement and who, at worst, fail while daring greatly." And his last line about that person who dares greatly, it's a good one. Their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

I want you to think about that. It's not just about credit and who gets -- or takes -- it. It's about trying and doing. Don't be afraid of failure. Be afraid of never tasting it. Take this as your call to action. I am calling on you to serve. We need your contributions. So get loud, get active, in whatever field you want to get involved in. Make a difference in the lives of your neighbors, in your city, in your state, in your country -- just like many other GW graduates have done, including those who have gone into space, who have won Olympic medals and held public office. They all took risks.

They all got knocked down, and maybe failed the first, second, or tenth time that they tried, but every single one of them made the choice not to give up.

Now, I'm not saying all you need to become an astronaut is to run for office. I'm saying put yourself out there. Don't be a timid soul that knows neither victory nor defeat. You should never forget the time spent here or what you accomplished here. But you also shouldn't lose sight of what lies ahead, what you can still accomplish, what you must accomplish to move our nation forward.

So with that, I cannot tell you how much of a honor it is for me to welcome each of you as the newest members of the GW alumni community. Congratulations, class of 2017. It's time to get in the arena.

God bless you all.

God bless our troops.

And God bless the United States of America.

- GW -