

Remarks for La Follette School of Public Affairs graduation May 17, 2008

Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton

Graduates, Faculty, Trustees, Family and special guests:

Dennis, WW=P & La Follette, MHP

The passing of time has only solidified Fighting Bob La Follette as an archetype that continues to govern Wisconsin's political consciousness. He set the bar high as a public servant of uncompromised integrity, a man incapable of acting in contradiction with his convictions, a politician loath to indulge in spin.

He was truly an original thinker, a legitimate heir to the creative imagination of the American founders that reconfigured the familiar into new patterns and structures as they created an unprecedented government.

And now we focus our admiration on you, La Follette graduates, the next generation, our heroes-to-be, launched today into a world ready to be rebooted, still governed by too many policies designed for another age, with institutions waiting to be re-imagined for a 21st century global economy.

Questions loom large and small, global and local in origin. Here are just some of the dragons for you to slay:

- A war in Iraq so costly it has driven this nation into unprecedented debt and dictates default decisions on domestic spending priorities.
- Global climate change – really, George, everywhere—but federal government so underinvested in solutions that what we spend, for instance, annually on developing solar power = cost of just 9 hours at war in Iraq.
- Water. Saudis plan to halt wheat production by 2016 because of concerns about scarcity of water; droughts all over the US draw lustful gazes to our Great Lakes...the next president of US will need a framework for hydro-diplomacy.
- Income inequality in the U.S. is at its highest level since 1929. And that difference – between lowest average at \$15,000, mid at \$50,000 and highest percentile rankings average at \$1m— reflects disturbing ratio of 200% increase at top to <1% at bottom over last 25 years, and that yawning gap is policy-driven.
- Health care in U.S. ranks us 37th in world for infant mortality, and 37th as a national health system measured by effectiveness, cost, and access by the World Health Organization. Access to quality health care presents the most formidable challenge to state and national competitiveness and economic growth of all.
- We are in the midst of an epic financial crisis, seeing now the danger of allowing a shadow banking system to operate outside of the safety regulations that grew out of Great depression, yet we hear few voices calling for reform.
- The Department of Labor projects a shortfall of at least 10 million workers by 2010

- And a quick scan of this year's State of the State addresses across the nation reveals little innovation afoot – debt paid down with toll roads, income tax cut funded with sales tax increase, but a few strategic investments proposed in WI, IL and HI

Many dragons to slay and rich opportunities for you to author history. Perhaps you will join me in public service, or maybe make your contribution in the private or non-profit sectors. Roles therein, and the dynamic between sectors, also beg your innovation. Let me explain.

Start with the private sector. Taxpayers too often pick up the tab for businesses' unfortunate habit of lobbying against their own interest. I'll give you three quick examples. The auto industry, for instance, spent untold millions of dollars to oppose raising fuel efficiency standards and protect highly profitable and inefficient SUVs and light trucks; had those resources been directed to improving engines and transmissions, Detroit –and Janesville— might have been in a powerful position, with a hot market for both vehicles and hybrid technologies.

Electric utilities killed the congressional effort to require they derive a modest 10% of their power from renewable sources by 2020 three times in four years. Redirected investment instead in developing renewable sources would have them better positioned to survive gas prices tripling in just the past two years without gouging consumers.

And when the National Association of Manufacturers and Chambers of Commerce killed healthcare reform in 1992, they offered no alternative vision. Now fast rising costs in an anachronistic system bring their member businesses to their knees.

Have hope. Some business leaders finally reject those false economies and begin to build social issues into their strategy in a way that reflects their actual importance to companies. They notably take a position that their outlook improves when government operates effectively and efficiently, that it is in their interest to address state and national priorities that promote sustained economic growth and development to benefit all.

I see today potential alliances between government and business in the areas of health care and climate change that may well lead to the public sector accounting for a larger share of the Gross Domestic Product – and a faster growing economy with more broadly shared prosperity as a result. Your preparation makes you uniquely valuable to business to drive them more quickly along that trajectory.

The landscape for the non-profit sector today is nearly unrecognizable for the record growth in popularity of philanthropy (dollars donated), and especially of celebrity philanthropy. But there is no plan in place to gird that growth. And with the tremendous potential for charitable giving to underwrite the kind of innovations of economic significance that *will not* be undertaken by a private company and *cannot* be financed by government, we must

- take care to capture philanthropic potential to yield the highest and best results for society
- ensure that philanthropy does not supplant government's right role in providing for public education, safety, and health lest essential services fall prey to the whimsy of philanthropic taste.

- be careful not to breed bloated beasts of tax advantage but healthy embodiments of public interest, and make philanthropic organizations as accountable and transparent as we demand businesses must be.

The responsibility of your citizenship, the weight of a diploma from the La Follette School of Public Affairs and the intellectual muscle you've built here, position you to be part of the design team for our state and nation's future – whether from the public, private or non-profit sector, from a local or state or national or international desk.

Those questions large and small are all deeply intertwined in the issue of security, one that knows no state or national borders.

Let's think security issues from here in the state capitol, specifically human and economic security. A quick look at the status quo reveals a state short on cash, a legislature playing kick the can, an immigrant state then and now with a tradition of originality, a dense but fraying education infrastructure, a land rich in natural beauty and resources.

We are also a low-income state (bottom third), ranking 44-47th in productivity, which is directly linked to education levels so it won't surprise you that we have too few people with baccalaureate and graduate or professional degrees to drive growth. Our population growth rate is only half that of the nation as a whole; 2/3 of projected growth in the coming decade will be in our minority population. We have a much higher than average percentage of baby boomers here, and that number will grow.

You policy wonks must have given thought to the serious implications of this avalanche of aging in terms of workforce and healthcare needs. But have you considered that this growing slice of the electorate will drive the political agenda?

Wisconsin's economic security depends on bringing them and all voters to support an investment agenda for our state. If we are to expand pathways to your secure adulthood and a sustainable economy, we must update our thinking about infrastructure – the most important public assets that are vital to our economy and physical security.

So, beyond road and dams and air traffic control, factor in

- early care and childhood education, because we know so much about brain development and our productivity level pivots on this
- broad access to/affordability of high quality higher education, especially for that growing minority population we have so spectacularly failed to date
- pay equity – can't afford to lose the leading edge of the Young and the Restless
- universal health care coverage
- development of the creative economy to attract and hold the young and the restless – Film WI, regional economic development to attract the Young and the Restless

I insist on this last because, as leading urban researcher Charles Landry points out, "Creativity is one of the last remaining legal ways to gain an unfair advantage over the competition."

I can't believe that for lack of good examples in the two terms of the current president that we have lost our capacity to imagine how government can work well for the common good. I have tremendous faith that you are both wise and creative enough to craft public policy directed not at doctrine but at the reality before us –

- a reality that places our state's largest city near the top of the list for racial inequality by any measure, at great cost;
- a reality of the habits of gender discrimination that perpetuate violence against women and undermine the possibility of our security: when 90% of the men in a maximum security prison report they witnessed violence against their mother as a child, we know we have to quit trying to address this with the proceeds of bake sales and get serious.
- a reality that demands we engage with other countries of the world to examine what constitutes "just" globalization because, again, whether we speak of increasing natural disasters attributed to global climate change or teeming migrations driven by intractable poverty, our personal and state security depends on getting that right.

The second line of our Declaration of Independence reads, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Government's responsibility lies in securing the rights of the people, not defending capitalism and protecting markets. This is what America set out to do from the beginning; this was the enduring wisdom of the founders. Government today indeed must evolve for the dramatically changed context in which it operates, it must be accountable to perform well for all and produce results that improve our daily lives, it must be fiscally accountable and ethical in all operations and intent, but it must, as ever, preserve the public trust and address the public issues that define the common good.

Tom Brokaw wrote in the *Greatest Generation* about how our parents, facing global fascism, transformed America and made us the greatest industrial nation in the world. Protection of the great lakes and global climate change and income injustice and violence against women are no less a threat to state and global security. You have at least an equal opportunity to prove your mettle, to innovate the definition of "greatness" to be meaningful in the 21st century.

So be bold. Your diploma pays tribute to your raw energy, spirit of adventure and even audacity – all the right stuff to open doors to an exciting future for every one of you. Now it's up to you to keep the doors to our democracy open for the next generation.