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Student Speaker, Commencement
Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs
University of Wisconsin–Madison
May 16, 2009, Assembly Chambers, Wisconsin State Capitol*

Good morning Chief Justice Abrahamson, La Follette faculty and staff, family and friends, and of course, the Class of 2009.

I must confess, my original speech was to ask not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country...but, I couldn't quite pull off the aristocratic New England accent, so instead you'll have to settle for a few reflections on what brings us all here today.

This chamber is a unique venue for our graduation. We could, after all, be packed into the Kohl Center, awaiting our 2.5 seconds of fame, perhaps as graduates in business, engineering, or law each with promising careers in the auto industry or with some firm on Wall Street. But instead we're sitting in the halls of government having prepared ourselves for public service. Clearly, something is different here.

Nearly two years ago, 51 of us came together—quite literally, from all corners of the earth. We were teachers, environmentalists, marketing specialists, veterans, waiters, non-profit staffers, Peace Corps and Americorps volunteers, students, legislative assistants, community activists, and even a collection of old, married guys. We came with a diverse set of talents and world views, yet we were still drawn together for a common purpose.

We have chosen this profession in public policy—as we've had to explain countless times—to have influence in the proverbial “system,” to work through government, non-profits, or business. We are to be public managers, analysts, problem solvers, and eventually decision makers for the most crucial issues of our time: education, health care, energy and climate change, poverty, finance, immigration and global security—these policy challenges need sharp, creative minds and leaders who put service before self.

We're not doing this career for the money. **Definitely** not for the money. Nor is it for the adrenaline rush of making the sale or designing the next supercomputer which will be obsolete in a month anyway and take all of your files with it. No...

we are driven by a desire to do something special, to make society better, to go beyond the ordinary existence of being a resident in the world. We do this because, as our school's namesake put it, "mere passive citizenship is not enough."

Indeed, this field requires us to be many things: passionate and idealistic, but also pragmatic, discerning ... logical. The State of Wisconsin recognized this need 25 years ago and established the institute which has since become the La Follette School of Public Affairs. Today we join the ranks of graduates who are making a difference. These are kindred spirits, people who appreciate the subtleties of p-values and sensitivity analyses, the particulars of trade agreements, and the inner workings of legislative politics. There are others out there who know what it's like to watch the sun rise after a night of Capstone with 4 of your new best friends. And then there's the most elite group of all: those who have experienced firsthand the 'moonwalk' skills of Professor Wallace.

Yes, this program has given us a plethora of memories and experiences. Some we will take with us far into our careers where in the right moment, a critical insight or relationship from these last two years will make the difference in achieving the greater good. Other memories from this journey are hard to forget. And trust me, I've tried. I don't care what the spell check says, "timeframe" is **one** word.

Our graduation comes at an unprecedented time of global turmoil and conflict. These are not ordinary days. Every facet of society is under stress and governments are seeking ways to bring order and predictability to the chaos. But with these challenges, there are new possibilities. There is fear and uncertainty, but also hope in new ideas and a citizenry becoming re-engaged and interested in the affairs of state. And it is because we have chosen a vocation of public service that we will meet these challenges as participants in the solution, not as spectators.

And if you're not convinced by that, then consider this: you selected someone born and raised in **Minnesota** to speak today in the **Wisconsin** State Capitol. These are indeed extraordinary times. Thank you and good luck to us all!

Before I relinquish the podium, it is my pleasure to introduce our faculty speaker, Prof. Bob Haveman. Bob is Professor Emeritus in Public Affairs and Economics. Among other things, he taught us not to let walls get in the way of progress and we followed his chalk every step of the way. So Bob, on behalf of the class of 2009, I would like to present you with a box of colored chalk to commemorate your life of service at this university. Thank you.