



Keynote Commencement Address to the
Italian Diplomatic Academy

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Excellencies,
Esteemed Professors and Graduates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly humbled by the privilege to yet again address such a distinguished gathering of young leaders in this spectacular setting. Allow me to begin by offering my most sincere congratulations to the graduates of the Italian Diplomatic Academy.

The mission of this institution has been to teach you how to engage with the world of tomorrow—not simply by helping you understand global developments, but also inspiring you to try to shape them yourselves.

A world-class faculty has guided you on a great journey of academic discovery. They introduced you to the nobility of public service and the quest for the greater good—that of your country, and the rest of humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The education of diplomats goes back centuries. A famous Florentine thinker remains known for strongly cautioning them against the temptation to dream of power one's side doesn't have and can't acquire.

He called this "the way to the abyss," and, drawing upon contemporary examples, instructed his readers in the art of "steer[ing] clear of it."

The emergence of successive European orders owes much to the hard work and imagination of generations of diplomats. History reminds us of the accomplishments of the treaties of Westphalia, Vienna, Berlin, and Rome. Each time the fighting ended, peace went on to be sustained on the basis of negotiated principles of legitimacy.

Sometimes, the diplomats begin their work whilst the war still rages on. So in late 1943, representatives of the four principal allied powers met in Moscow to set the broad parameters for what was at first called a "general international organization." Less than a year later, they reconvened in Washington to continue their work. And less than a year after that, they were joined in California by 46 other allied delegations to hammer out the United Nations Charter.

In his address to the final session of the San Francisco Conference, the American president, Harry S. Truman, called the Organization that had just been established a "[most] solid structure upon which we can build a better world."

And indeed they have.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite much turmoil and strife in the intervening decades, global peace has been kept, and humanity has grown more prosperous. Subjugated nations have won their liberty; the universality of human rights has been enshrined into laws; and billions have been lifted out of poverty.

There is no doubt that the world is a much better place today because of the United Nations.

In the words of the second President of the General Assembly, Brazil's Oswaldo Aranha, the United Nations "is not merely a political organization. It is not a simple covenant between nations, but an undertaking in human thought and sentiment. From here," he concluded, "emanates [...] a faith that the peoples of the earth may learn to know and trust each other in the full understanding of a common destiny."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an impressive feat of history that this multilateral framework is still honored by most governments most of the time. More than 70 years since it was established, the UN continues to inspire humanity and call the world to action. Almost to this day six years ago, I was elected President of the General Assembly. My proudest achievement was launching the historic diplomatic negotiations that led to the establishment of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This bold and universal covenant for global solidarity was designed to eliminate extreme poverty, ensure widespread economic growth, reduce inequality within and between states, and protect the planet from environmental degradation.

There is much road to travel in the implementation of the SDGs. It is perhaps the hardest task humanity has ever set for itself. Only the convening power of the United Nations could have gotten us this far. And as the sole institution of our times where all sovereign states come together to meet on equal ground, the UN is the only platform from which we can hope to bring about sustainable development to all corners of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just like everything else that has ever been crafted by human beings, the United Nations is an imperfect creation. So it should come as no great surprise that this global safety net has become brittle with age.

It is difficult to point to any single cause that has led to its attrition. A cumulative train of events over the past few decades has produced a divergence in the approaches of major powers towards a growing list of geopolitical challenges. This has limited the number of issues that may be efficiently addressed through high-level diplomacy.

My good friend Ian Bremmer—one of today’s most influential thinkers on international relations—describes the world we’re living in as a G-Zero World: one in which no single country or durable alliance proffers a coherent set of ideas or policies that amount to a credible claim to global leadership.

Of course, diplomats still meet with each other on a regular basis. But their discourse has increasingly become transactional. There seems to be less and less room to persuade one another, or reason together. It’s almost as if they’ve lost the ability to speak a common language. Old rules have lost their edge, and new ones have not come in their stead.

We thus find ourselves in an interregnum—in what Henry Kissinger terms a “period of upheaval”—in which “the old order is in flux while the shape of the replacement is highly uncertain.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our planet is overheating, and the science confirms it: global warming has hit an all-time peak; so have carbon dioxide emissions. We are in the hottest period on record.

I’m not the first, and certainly not the most competent, person to say this, but I’m afraid we might be losing the war on climate change.

Meanwhile, wars of a more conventional sort are spreading: the number of violent conflicts is ascending sharply. Right now, they’re taking place in over 130 states—that’s nearly 70 percent of the world’s countries.

It's a shockingly long list—one that unavoidably begins with those that make the headlines on a regular basis, like Syria and Yemen. But let's not forget the drug wars of Mexico and the Philippines; the continuing slaughter in Darfur and South Sudan; the plight of the Rohingya; and the fact that there are at least six distinct major insurgencies taking place in the Democratic Republic of Congo as we speak.

It thus comes as no surprise that the number of refugees worldwide is highest in history—and rising. Every single day, there are 28,000 new souls becoming displaced—that's two completely full arenas of this size.

On opposite sides of Asia, world powers have chosen to deal with the vital issue of nuclear weapons in profoundly different ways—in each case, the outcome remains wholly uncertain.

There are so many reasons to be worried about where the world is going. If I haven't convinced you so far, then let me put forward the final argument: Italy's not playing in the World Cup!

How can this be normal?

Dear Graduates,

What do you do when the world you believe in, is no longer the world you see?

This is not a rhetorical question. It's the reality for most of us here. And it's not going to go away so easily.

So, what do you do?

My answer is “don't stop believing.”

Don't think for a second that you're too weak or insignificant to be an effective agent of betterment, and don't be tempted to hope that positive change will come on its own.

If shaping tomorrow is something you care about, then you need to become engaged in the shortest possible order.

And when in doing so you hit an obstacle—and trust me, you will, more often than you can imagine—don't be dismayed. Don't drop the ball, and turn away. A great world leader famously said, "if you're going through Hell, keep going." That is a grand lesson in character and perseverance.

Some may well advise you—possibly with the best intentions—to do the opposite. To stay in your zone of comfort and let others make decisions for you. But for people with diplomas of the Italian Diplomatic Academy in hand, I don't believe that should be an option.

Others may tell you to focus narrowly on getting your own house in order—your city or your nation, for instance. This is entirely legitimate advice, for we naturally care most about our own community. But in this time of global change, I'm afraid that's just not enough. What happens beyond our particular jurisdiction or border affects us as just much as what happens at home. Don't fall for the illusion that limiting your scope will somehow inoculate you against global perils.

Dear Graduates,

When I said "don't stop believing in the world you want to see," I didn't mean you should dismiss or reject the experience of others.

You mustn't become a prisoner of your own ways. Resist thinking that you're always in the right, or the urge to look down upon those who disagree with you. Soak up their views and absorb their knowledge, so that you may improve your own bearings. Listen to what others have to say, and be ready to reciprocate; try to understand what leads them to think differently from you.

Engage broadly; engage with an open mind; engage with forbearance and magnanimity.

At bottom, that's what your chosen profession is about. And remember: when you're a diplomat—even when you're just starting out—the work you do can make a disproportionate amount of difference.

Dear Graduates,

“Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Thomas Hobbes used just five words to describe what life was like in his allegory of state of nature—devoid of rules held in common; with no sense of right and wrong, justice and injustice—with only “force and fraud” to rely upon.

The state of nature is where we begin to revert back when our institutions start failing due to mismanagement or the lack of maintenance.

But disregarding our stewardship over them would constitute a most dangerous exercise in self-defeat—for institutions are what stands between us and barbarism. They are the bulwark against chaos and the stronghold against appetites unrestrained.

When they are no longer in optimal condition, the answer lies not in wholesale abandonment or demolition.

It's infinitely easier to destroy; than to rebuild. So you have to be careful in the choices you make and the actions you pursue.

Do not strike in anger and frustration at the entire edifice because some part of the construction has ceased to perform.

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I came across a good piece of advice the other day: if your house gets flooded, don't cancel your fire insurance.

Reform requires prudence and judgment, so you can decide to perpetuate what's good and healthy, and fix what's not.

If you get it wrong, try again. Don't stop believing and don't stop acting with the courage of your convictions. Because if you succumb to despondency—if you throw up your hands in the air—then you'll just be making your “way to the abyss,” instead of “steer[ing] clear of it.”

And so we come back full circle to the imperative of engaging broadly with the world—as a citizen, as a diplomat, and as a steward of institutions that hold our nations together.

In so doing, you will involve yourself in the honorable quest to transform those notorious five Hobbesian words into their noble opposites: to move away from the force and fraud of “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” towards the concert and reason of “shared, flourishing, good, civilized, and enduring”—the definition of what governance needs to be about in a world that is worth to believe in.

Thank you for your attention.