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Helena High School Commencement

Max S. Baucus

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(1) Subject*: **none**

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Congress 4

Honored graduates, etc.

Last May 11, a Saturday, 125,000 people got together in the shadow of the Washington Monument in Washington, D. C. to celebrate Human Kindness Day. The weather was really beautiful--the sun was shining, it was nice and warm, the humidity was down to 65 percent--a perfect day for the celebration of human kindness.

The people started to show up early in the morning with blankets to spread on the grass, picnic lunches, and plenty of suntan lotion. By noon there was an ocean of people in the shadow of the Washington Monument, people of all ages and colors. Many had come to hear the speeches, others had come to enjoy the weather, and thousands more had come to see and hear Stevie Wonder and his band.

It started out to be a great thing, but by the time the Human Kindness Day Celebration had ended, there had been more than 300 assaults, stabbings and beatings. More than 60 people were in the hospital. A public relations aid to Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz had lost an eye to the blade of a knife. So many arrests had been made, the police lost track of the total by the end of the day.

Many of those who landed in the hospital said they had been assaulted or robbed in full view of countless people, that their cries for help were ignored. The man who had been stabbed in the eye staggered around for twenty minutes trying to find someone who would help him to a first aid station, but no one would. As you can see, the Human Kindness Day Celebration was a lie, a very cruel lie that resulted in pain, suffering, and a tortured conscience on the part of the community and the nation.

As you know, this was by no means the first example of a nation lying to itself. For more than a decade we told ourselves there was such a thing as peace with honor through war and dishonor. How much did the Vietnam lie cost us? Mere numbers don't tell the story--55,000 American dead, 250,000 wounded, hundreds of billions of dollars wasted, inflation, unemployment, and recession--these are just numbers and facts and figures. The real story is in the tears Americans shed for loved ones who were crippled or killed, in the eyes of young person who can't find a job, in the fear and uncertainty felt by those Vietnamese who fled the catastrophe to find themselves in a strange and not altogether friendly country.

As you can see, lies lead to hardship and suffering. It's true for individuals as much as nations.

Today you are graduating from high school. I'll bet that each of you, as you think back to those days of grade school, can't help but ask yourself where the time has gone. When it boils right down to it, I'll bet the time seems very short. It's certainly true for me. In some ways it seems like only yesterday that I was sitting through a commencement address just like you are today. Like you, I was anxious for it to be over. There are better things to do than listening to a congressman spout pearls of wisdom.

It really was only a very few yesterdays that each of you was carrying your crayons to your first day of school. But think of this for a moment: In a very few tomorrows, you will be the generation that is running this country. When that day comes, you'll once again ask yourself where the time has gone. There's an old piece of Japanese poetry that goes--"I always knew I'd walk this road, but I didn't know it would be this soon." I think it rhymes in Japanese but I'm not sure. (SMILE) Soon, very soon, you'll be walking the road of leadership of the greatest country in history. That's why guys like me come to talk to you on days like this. We care about what happens to America and what happens to you.

Sooner than you think you will be deciding whether or not we must endure more Human Kindness Days and Vietnams. Sooner than you think, you will be deciding whether or not a nation will close its eyes to truth, preferring to believe instead that lies can become truth if we just believe them hard enough.

A nation is only as good as its people. A nation can survive and prosper only if its people are up to the challenges of the age. The people must be able to look around them and see and recognize those challenges for what they are. If the people allow themselves to think that Human Kindness can be generated simply by celebrating the idea, then we'll have more tragedies in store for us like the one last May 11. We'll have more Vietnams if people accept the idea that it's honorable to bomb tiny nations into accepting our way of doing things.

Instead of talking about lies, let's talk for a moment about honesty. What does it really mean to be honest with yourself and others? In my view, it means more than just not telling lies. For one thing, it means being aware and alert about what's going on around you. A person who closes his eyes to reality and just goes his own merry way can hardly be thought of as being honest. A person who prefers not to acknowledge that the future holds difficulties which need planning for today is not an honest person. That man or woman is in for some suffering, and chances are that others will suffer because of his dishonesty.

Honesty means action. He who sits idly by while the world around him pursues lies is guilty of the worst kind of dishonesty. This is one reason I'm here today. I'm going to level with you. I'm not going to tell you that the future is all flowers and smiles. It's not. You've got some tough decisions and hard times ahead of you.

Many of you face the hassles of college. You'll have to decide on your major and having done that you'll have to decide on whether to change that major. You'll have to decide where your life is going and then you'll face the question of whether the life you're building is what you want it to be.

Others of you will go to trade schools and still others will go into business or to jobs in the very near future. You'll face the same decisions and questions.

Many of you will soon be married. I'm told that can be a real hassle. You'll face the question of whether your wife or husband meets your expectations, and then you'll wonder if you meet your mate's expectations of you.

You'll have made hundreds of critical decisions about your life and livelihood by the time a very few tomorrows become yesterday. The world out there isn't exactly cooperative in helping you make those decisions. In fact it can be downright hostile. It can be deceiving.

In my way of thinking, honesty is the key to meeting that world successfully--honesty with yourself and others. Know now that you must plan realistically for the future and that much hard work is in store. Save yourself the pain and discomfort that comes from thinking the world will hand you happiness on a platter. Know now that your country needs your brain and your voice if it is to avoid past mistakes and tragedies. Know that you cannot keep quiet and expect the nation to act according to your ideals and convictions.

I'm reminded of the words of a German minister who was liberated from Buchenwald Concentration Camp at the end of the Second World War.

"They came for the Jews and since I am not a Jew I did not protest. They came for the Catholics and since I am not a Catholic I did not protest. Then they came for me and there was no one left to protest."

The dishonesty of being quiet when you should be heard is the cruelest of lies. Never be afraid to speak up for the truth as you see it, regardless of what the crowd thinks. Your voice could be the one that prevents savagery in the name of human kindness, shame in the name of honor, and war in the name of peace.

Thank you very much.