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Thompson Falls High School Graduation

Max S. Baucus

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

"Thompson Falls Graduation"

Senator Max Baucus
Thompson Falls, Montana

May 28, 1995

Thank you for that kind introduction. And I congratulate each of you graduating today. It's an honor to share this special day with you, your families and your friends.

Before coming here, I did a little research on the history and tradition of graduation ceremonies.

The first known graduation ceremony took place over 800 years ago in Italy.

Montana's first graduation remains for our historians to uncover. But our first schools sprung up in the mining camps of Southwest Montana. So I suspect it was a no-frills ceremony in Nevada City, Virginia City or Bannack.

I do know, however, that here in America the first graduation occurred three hundred and fifty three years ago Harvard. There were nine graduates at that first American commencement. They sat through three addresses: one in Latin, one in Greek and one in Hebrew. It closed with a long debate on philosophy, conducted entirely in Latin.

You'll be glad to know I will give only one talk. A short one. But it will be in Latin ... just kidding.

My son is also graduating from High School this year. So I thought he might give me some advice. He told me, "Dad, keep it short." I'm aiming to live up to that.

PRESERVING MONTANA VALUES

And I'll begin by telling you that you are very lucky people. In the years to come, you may well spend some time away from Sanders County. To serve your country in the armed services. To continue school. To start a career. Or simply to see the world.

I hope that, whatever you choose, you will one day return to Montana. But I know that the values you have learned here in Thompson Falls will be with you forever; and that as time passes, you will appreciate them all the more.

We in Montana have a tradition of civility and small-town decency.

We have a natural heritage of clean air, clean water and the world's best hunting and fishing.

And we inherit a bedrock patriotism, and a belief in open government, freedom and democracy.

That is an extraordinary legacy. No sum of money could buy it. And its preservation depends on citizens who are informed and involved in their communities; who understand the value of our natural heritage; who are willing to work hard, sacrifice, and think about the future.

You are very lucky to grow up with this heritage. And don't ever take it for granted, because it is fragile.

THE MILITIA

In the past year, we got a reminder of that. From the so-called "militia" organizations, we see intimidation of neighbors. Attacks on Jews and minorities. Threats against law enforcement. And contempt for democracy.

Nothing has pained me more than to see some of these people pose as defenders of the Constitution. Because they ignore the part of the Constitution that is most important.

As we protect the rights that make our country so great -- the right to free speech and free association; the right to bear arms; the right to vote; the right to privacy -- we must remember the responsibilities that give those rights meaning.

The responsibility to respect our neighbors. To respect our sheriffs and police officers. To obey the law. And to show our dissatisfaction with government at elections, not with threats of violence.

OSHA LOGGING REGULATIONS

It is fine to be angry with the government. It is often right to be angry with the government. But there is a right way and a wrong way to deal with it.

Here is an example of the right way. Back in February, a group of loggers gave me a piece of news. They said that a government agency called "OSHA," -- the Occupational Safety and Health Administration -- had ordered them to buy steel-toed, chainsaw-resistant boots to protect their feet. They had two weeks grace, and after that it was no boots, no work.

Well, steel-toed boots may sound good to someone sitting behind a desk in Washington. But up by Thompson Pass, they can make the job more dangerous, not less. On

a cold day, steel-toed boots make your feet go numb. When your feet go numb out on a steep hill, you can slip and fall. And that's no joke when you're holding a live chainsaw.

Because these loggers acted so fast, I was able to get to the Secretary of Labor. He agreed to stop the regulations. And though we're not done yet, I think we'll get a happy ending. But the fact is, nobody at a desk in Washington should be telling people who work in the woods what kind of shoes to wear.

These loggers were right to be angry. But they also dealt with the problem in the right way. They understood that we live in America. A country where working people can tell the government what to do. Where ordinary people can be heroes. And don't ever let anyone tell you different.

DON MACKEY

You might have heard of a man named Don Mackey. He grew up down to the south in Hamilton. Like many of you, he was a kid who grew up with woods nearby and liked the outdoors. So after he graduated from high school, he spent eight years or so working in logging, and then moved over to the Forest Service.

Mackey was one of ten Smokejumpers from the Northern Region team who flew out to Colorado to help put down the Glenwood Springs Fire last year. Our Montana writer Norman Maclean, who spent a lot of time on timber lines, described the Smokejumpers this way in his book Young Men and Fire:

"The Smokejumpers are ... the crack firefighters of the Forest Service, the shock troops. Whenever fires are critical, which practically always means big, that's where they are, from Missoula, Montana, to Minnesota to New Mexico to Alaska, and they don't care how they get there -- by plane, bus, horse, or on foot, just so it is the fastest way."

To be a Smokejumper is to be part of an elite. You need to be physically strong. You need to be smart and disciplined. And you need extraordinary courage.

Don Mackey had all of that, and he had something more. He had a sense of duty, honor and compassion. The qualities that make an ordinary man or woman a hero.

When the wind shifted out at Glenwood Springs last year, Mackey was directing his crew from the top of a ridge. It was a safe spot, and he could have stayed right there. But when the fire blew up, and he saw his crew trapped on the slope below, he went back down from safety into the woods.

Quentin Rhoades, one of the men he saved, tells how Mackey came down the ridge, appeared in the middle of the smoke and the noise of the fire, and brought eight firefighters

out to a safe area. And then he turned back once again, to save the rest. When he went back downhill the second time, the fire caught him.

He is buried in Hamilton today. "If he had stayed with us," says Rhoades, "he would have lived."

HOME TOWN HEROES

That shows you something. Very few are asked to make the sacrifice Don Mackey made. But every day, Montanans give of themselves to make our state the special place it is.

People who work in the woods. Forest Service professionals like those at the Thompson Falls station who put themselves on the line when they went up to save lives and communities during the Yaak and Little Wolf fires last year.

People in law enforcement. People like County Attorney Bob Slomski and Sheriff Gene Arnold. As this militia movement has grown, law officers all over Montana have faced down some of the most violent, irrational, lawless people in our country. They keep their friends and neighbors safe. There is nothing more brave, more honorable, more heroic than that.

Look at your teachers. People like R.J. Trevithick, retiring this year after 25 years of serving the community. Every year they make sure the boys and girls from Northwest Montana go out in the world able to compete with the kids from New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Beijing; with an understanding of our Montana heritage; with an appreciation of our values; and with the skills to preserve them for the next generation.

Look at your neighbors. People who give something back to the community every day.

People like Cheye Ann Butler, doing volunteer work in groups that defend community values, like the Sanders County Coalition for Human Dignity and the Northwest Montana Human Rights Alliance.

Public servants like County Commissioner Cherie Hooten.

Entrepreneurs who do long hours at small businesses.

Business leaders like the people at the Thompson River Lumber Company, who have kept their commitment to the community in good times and bad.

CONCLUSION

There are an infinite number of ways to serve your country, your state and your community.

Like I said at the beginning, I know your generation has some tough challenges. They may not be the challenges Don Mackey faced. But in some ways they are just as difficult.

In a world more closely linked by trade and technology than ever before, you have to keep up with the Class of '95 in high schools not just across America, but all over the world.

The next generation of Montana timber workers has all it can handle with the young people across our northern border.

We even have people in California and Minneapolis who are looking out here like old-time prospectors to find a place to dump their garbage.

But these are challenges we can meet. Montanans have been ready and willing for a challenge ever since David Thompson came down on his raft and gave this town its name in 1811. Nobody works harder than the men and women in Montana timber communities. And no big city garbage salesman will get one inch past the Idaho line if I have anything to say about it.

I know that when you give a commencement address, you're supposed to give advice. But I'll leave that to your parents and teachers.

All I will say is that you have great opportunities ahead. I know you can make the most of them. And when you do, your future is as big as the peaks of the Cabinet Mountains.

Congratulations. Good luck. Thank you, and God bless you.