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Browning High School Commencement

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Thank you, Ivan, for that kind introduction. 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. Here in America the first graduation occurred three hundred and fifty three years ago at 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.

I’ve also learned about a new tradition. Last weekend I was at the graduation in St. Regis. I gave a talk, and everything seemed to be going fine. The graduates came up and got their diplomas ... and the last fellow in line gave me a big hug and a kiss.

I’m hoping that doesn’t catch on elsewhere. But just in case, Greg Osborne, I know you’re there and you won’t take me by surprise this time.

V-E DAY FIFTY YEARS LATER

You all probably saw and heard about the V-E Day anniversary three weeks ago -- the events marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

Watching it myself, in the month when my own son graduated high school and I prepared for this commencement address, brought something home to me. That is, in many ways you are a lucky generation.

When I was born, at the beginning of the war, Montana high school graduates were not thinking much about whether to go on to college. They were not making tough decisions between work at home on the ranch or going off to find a job in the city.
It was just a few months after Pearl Harbor. And the young people of the Blackfeet Nation -- like the high school graduates in every Montana town, county and reservation -- were signing up as soldiers, sailors, Air Force pilots, Army nurses and Marines.

**THE BLACKFEET NATION IN THE WAR**

That was a time when ordinary people had to become heroes.

You could find people from the Blackfeet Nation all over the world. In the Philippines with MacArthur. In the Pacific Islands. In Italy, France, Belgium and Germany. Three Blackfoot Marines -- Orville Goss, Sidney Brown and Richard Brown -- were wounded at Iwo Jima, the bloodiest battle our Marine Corps has ever fought.

Many of them came back as war heroes. Like Sergeant Ernest DuBray, who joined the Air Force and was honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross.

And some of them never came back.

Roger Paul was one. A kid like many of you. A smart, active young man who liked the outdoors. He won the Silver Star -- a medal reserved for the bravest, most heroic soldiers we have. And he gave his life to free Europe from the Nazis.

**PRESERVING OUR VALUES**

You might ask, why go into all that today?

Because we all know about the challenges ahead. Montanans, whether they grow up in Indian country, on the ranches and farms to the east, in our cities or in small timber communities, have some tough competition.

You have to be better-educated, harder-working, in some ways tougher than ever before to compete with the rest of the country, and with our international competitors. But you also have a lot to be thankful for.

You are growing up in an era of peace. An era in which, for the first time in nearly seventy years, we have no powerful foreign enemies. And that means you have many more options than the World War II generation.

Some of you will go on to serve our country in the Armed Services. Some will become public servants, like George Heavy Runner in the Legislature or our friends on the Tribal Council. Others will be doctors and lawyers. The newspapers are already predicting a great future in science and engineering for Kendra Bird and Michele Calftail. There are no limits.
But one thing is just the same as it was fifty years ago. The values you have learned here are as important -- and in some ways as fragile -- as they were back when Roger Paul went off to war. And it is up to you to make sure these values are always with us.

Our pride in our history and heritage.

Our appreciation of natural beauty, and the value we place on preserving America's most beautiful National Parks and the world's best hunting and fishing.

Our faith in freedom, open government and democracy.

That is an extraordinary legacy. No sum of money could buy it. And its preservation depends on something simple: on our people.

On citizens who are willing to work hard.

Who sacrifice and think about the future.

Who are informed about the issues we face and the decisions our governments makes on them.

Who give something back to the families and communities that raised them.

HOME TOWN HEROES

And that in turn reminds us of something else. That is, you don’t have to fight to be a hero. You don’t have to go overseas. You don’t have to leave home at all.

Because people right here at home are heroes. Every day, Montanans give of themselves to make our state the special place it is.

Look at people in law enforcement. They put themselves on the line to preserve the rule of law in our state. There is nothing more brave, more honorable, more heroic than that.

People in education. Like Superintendent Ivan Small, who has organized school boards across the whole state of Montana to make sure the federal government remembers its responsibility to reservation schools. Like Principal William Meehan.

And like your teachers. Carole Juneau. Creighton Steiner. Elaine Wilmot. Shannon Sallois and so many others whom you have grown up with.

Every year they make sure the boys and girls of the Blackfeet Nation go out in the world skilled enough in science, math and English to compete with graduates from New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Beijing. Understanding the great heritage of Indian Country.
Appreciating the values all Americans share. Able to preserve those values for the next generation.

And your neighbors who give something back to the community every day.

The people at the Museum of the Plains Indian, who keep the flame of knowledge and tradition burning.

People in public service, like Earl Old Person, Marlene Bear-Walter and the others on the Blackfeet Tribal Council.

People in health and medicine, like Colleen Williamson and the Blackfeet Health and Safety Corps.

And people in business, like Lowell Meznarich and Marty Meineke at the Blackfeet Writing Company, who run a great company and provide jobs for the community.

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 Roger Paul's generation faced. But in some ways they are just as difficult.

But these are challenges we can meet. I believe in you and I know you can do 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 Glacier Park.

Congratulations.

Good luck.

Eekakemot.