Georgetown University

Master of Science in Foreign Service Tropaia

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Excellencies,
Dear Parents and families,
Distinguished MSFS Class of 2017,

It is a distinct honor and privilege for me to be here today to celebrate your graduation, and to say a few words of encouragement as you embark on your successful professional lives. Looking back when I was in your place 28 years ago, I recall so vividly a sense of excitement and hope for the future, a strong determination to succeed, and a tiny bit of anxiety for the uncharted path which I was about to embark on.

From here, I went to Turkey to work for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, just before the Berlin Wall came down, and Ronald Regan and Mikhail Gorbachev declared the end of the Cold War. At my first UN posting in Turkey, I watched the First Gulf War unfold in neighboring Iraq, and then I was thrown into dealing with the Kurdish Refugee Crisis in South Eastern Turkey and the northern Iraq region – an immediate consequence of the First Gulf War.

Since that “baptism by fire”, I have worked in or on conflicts and crises for most of my professional life. Earlier in my career, my job was to try and tackle the humanitarian consequences of conflicts and to alleviate the suffering of people through humanitarian actions. To address political and security challenges more directly, I then moved to peacekeeping. I worked in the midst of the civil war in Bosnia in the 1990s, and more recently, I was responsible for UN operations in places like Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, Syria, and Lebanon. I went on to the United Nations Development Programme to tackle crises from development perspectives, so that underlining causes of crises are better addressed. Now, I’m just two weeks into my new position in charge of disarmament affairs at the United Nations. Disarmament and security are in fact two sides of the same coin. My new challenge is to think of ways to make the world a more secure place, in which disarmament can make contributions.

So far, I have visited 115 countries in the world, from war-torn South Sudan to disaster-struck Myanmar, from conflict-ridden Ukraine to crisis-affected Afghanistan. I have greatly enjoyed every minute of my work, and all of my diverse responsibilities. I have learned so much about this world we are living in, and am still learning new things every day. I have two somewhat contradictory, but interlinked, observations about the state of the world today.

On the one hand, the world is in a mess. Wars and conflicts do not easily end today, causing unspeakable suffering of people, as we witness in Syria. There are no winners in today’s wars. The world today has a record-high 65.3 million people forcibly displaced from their homes. There are some 130 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, requiring the international community more than 22 billion USD in aid.

On the other hand, if we all work together, the world is able to tackle most difficult challenges and problems. Globally, the number of people living in extreme poverty has
declined by more than half, falling from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015. The primary school enrolment rate in developing countries has reached 91% in 2015, and the literacy rate among the youth between 15 and 24 years old reached 91% at the global level in the same year. The unprecedented efforts of all of us – and I hope you will note that I don’t say “the UN”, as this was the global efforts involving governments, non-governmental organizations, private sectors and citizens – have resulted in profound achievements. Building on these achievements, we now have Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals, with the slogan of “Leave No One Behind”. The international community has even agreed to start working together to address the challenge of migration, which is one of the most sensitive and important issues of our time.

This is what keeps me going. The world continues to be full of challenges, problems, violence and misery, but, we have demonstrated that by working together and finding common ground, we can make impressive progress. We can make the world a better, more prosperous, safer and more secure place.

I’m not a very philosophical person, but my 28 years of international service also gave me opportunities to reflect on nature of humankind, our weaknesses and strengths, and the wonderful potential we have together for the future.

We can be unbelievably brutal and cruel to our fellow humans. But we can also be incredibly brave to save others, as I saw an old Croatian man who sheltered for months a widow and daughter of his Muslim friend from violence by Croatian militias. When he could no longer protect them, he drove through check points to bring them to the UNHCR office, which I was heading, to ask for their protection. When I met an old lady displaced from Srebrenica, whose father fought in WWI, husband in WWII, son and grandsons missing in the Bosnian civil war at the time, I came to understand the real meaning of “resilience” and “human dignity”. She could still hope for a better future for her family in the midst of tragedy, and was able to care for my safety and security while working in the war zone.

Not only my career has made my professional life satisfying and intellectually exciting, it has also made my life profoundly rich. You are now at the start of your own exciting, rewarding and rich life.

I would like you to always remember and keep your dream, passion and motivation that you have today. I have always been an optimistic and somewhat idealistic person. But the 2 years at Georgetown equipped me with the skills and capacities to think strategically, pragmatically and realistically to truly strive to reach my own ideals and goals. The combination of your passion and the capacities you acquired here will bring you far in whatever the field you wish to pursue.
Dear Graduating MSFS Class of 2017,

As you start your own successful professional lives and become future leaders, allow me to end my remarks today with three important elements of leadership.

First, leadership is about courage. You will come across challenging moments in your career, when your judgement will be tested. Always sharpen your “moral compass”, think hard what will be the right thing to do, and take the courage to do it even in times of difficulty.

Second, leadership is about empowering others, creating space for others to shine as much as it is about inspiring and leading others. It is about appreciating diverse views and listening carefully. What one person can achieve might be small, but what we can achieve collectively, by working together, will be enormous. Leaders make that happen.

Third, no matter what your field of profession might be, leadership is also about keeping in your mind the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged, and thinking of your own ways to contribute to the shared vision of “Leaving No One Behind”. The world you live in today is going through dramatic changes and a paradigm shift. Economic activities and transactions, information and knowledge sharing, human mobility, cultural exchanges and social integrations are happening not just at the international level, but at the global scale. This is starting to affect our lives profoundly and the roles of governments, private corporations, international organizations, and individual citizens are put to fundamental question. Ultimately, we cannot succeed and be prosperous, if we leave behind some parts of our population. It is a responsibility of future leaders to think of a way that we will ALL succeed.

That’s it. The world is waiting for you. Off you go!

Thank you.