

I am extremely pleased to be with you this evening and share in your graduation celebration. It is a distinct honor to join you, the Y2K class, on such an auspicious occasion. Your jubilation this afternoon will be matched only by the unique challenges and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities ahead of you as public administrators and environmental professionals.

As both a practicing administrator and environmentalist, I take special delight in having an opportunity to share my thoughts about the world which you are about to enter.

The Chinese have a saying, “May you live in interesting times” which is understood by them as both a blessing and a curse. And I must say, I know of no other generation that will face such interesting, changing times, and that will have as much influence on the future shape of the world, its institutions, moral fabric, inter-global relationships and humanity, as will the class of the new millennium.

As a matter of fact, there is no comparable analogy in human history for the rate of change occurring in all facets of our lives. These changes are economic, political, cultural and social. The challenge of whether these changes become a blessing or curse for society rests squarely in your hands.

So this evening, I want to talk with you about five areas that are literally and figuratively changing everything we do. I will call them the five “Cs” of change. It is in these areas, particularly, that I believe you will determine if the future of humankind is blessed or cursed.

The first “C” is computers. As recently as 1960, the word computer was not listed in Webster’s dictionary. Yet this device has revolutionized the way we work and how we communicate, process and interpret data, shop, interact with governmental bodies and each other, balance our checkbooks and pay our bills. Computers, the Internet and other technological advances have paved the way to the new service economy. The curse of this new computer revolution is the digital divide—the poor being excluded from the benefits of the new economy because of lack of resources and access. The blessing is that you can make a difference: you can ensure that government guarantees a level playing field.

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The next “C” is commerce. Innovations in telecommunications have led to a new economic base in this country—service and information processing—which requires almost no investment in plants, equipment, or machinery in comparison to the manufacturing plants of our grandmothers’ days. Today’s hot dot-com companies are creating a new economy, but require fewer, and more well-educated workers, than did the old economy, as their business is service-driven, not production-driven.

The skills needed by today’s workers are also dramatically different from those required as recently as a decade ago. It is no longer possible, for example, to get a good-paying factory job that allows a family to live a middle-class lifestyle without the benefit of a high school diploma. More and more, traditional assembly line industrial jobs are being eliminated through robotics, just-in-time shipping and inventory management, enhanced specialization, and supplier contracting. And if jobs are not being eliminated, they require a higher level of education and training. It is no longer sufficient to have the physical ability to work on an assembly line, show up on-time, and follow orders. Problem-solving, communication skills, and an expertise in math and science are minimum requirements for jobs that pay a living wage and offer opportunities for upward mobility. Lastly, with union-sanctioned, two-tiered wage structures for new employees, today’s entry-level manufacturing jobs pay a lower wage and offer fewer benefits to those newly hired.

In the new economy, jobs in the manufacturing sector are viewed as transitional, perhaps even positions taken while contemplating a future career. These are no longer considered jobs for life. The same is true in government. Today, cost, performance, value, and benefits determine governmental priorities. As needs change, so do priorities and there are no longer guarantees that good performance will mean a job for life. It is certainly the case that government is no longer the employer of the last resort.

Another way these forces of economic change influence and affect us is through our taxation policies. Generally, our tax structure is based on the industrial model, so local government revenues in cities like Dayton, for example, are dwindling as factories close or reduce their employment base. We don’t yet tax the new economy companies in ways that allow us to recoup

revenues lost as the old economic order fades away. As you know, there is a moratorium on Internet taxation which hits at the heart of local government revenues with respect to the sales tax, and this creates a competitive disadvantage for those main-street businesses that must, by law, tax goods and services sold.

So the blessing of global commerce is that it is revolutionizing what we do and how we do it. The curse is that you as public administrators and environmental scientists must find a way to ensure jobs and self-sufficiency for a society steeped in the industrial model. This will be a difficult transition, not unlike our transition as a nation from the agrarian to the industrial model over a century ago. And you must be careful not to create a greater distinction between the haves and have-nots. It is you who must help ready our citizens for the future.

The next “C” is for children—those who are manifestations of ourselves, and who are smarter and more aware than my generation at the same age, and who are also more threatened. You have much to accomplish in the proper care and feeding of our children—from the gangs who seek to corrupt them, the adults that prey on them, the public schools that have failed them, and the handguns that kill them. In most urban centers, too many students drop out in junior high, and those who graduate are often unprepared for college or the world of work. But the true curse in our society is the number of innocent children killed or maimed by handguns. For example, in 1995:

- no children were killed in Japan
- 19 were killed by a handgun in the United Kingdom
- 57 were killed in Germany
- 153 were killed in Canada, and
- 5,285 were killed in the United States

Our juvenile suicide rate is twice as high as those of 21 other western nations. Over one million of our kids have access to guns, and our rate of violent juvenile deaths due to handguns is 12 times higher than that of the other 25 industrialized nations combined.

Two hundred million Americans own guns and, remember, there are only 260 million Americans! Your blessing for our children should be your vocal support of their education and safety. You must become their most ardent

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advocates and protectors. You, the class of the millennium, must ensure that no more innocent lives will be lost to violence. You must not be silent nor apologize for guaranteeing that our children are loved, protected, and secure. And it is you who must ensure that every child has access to a computer, an adult mentor, and the opportunity to realize his or her dreams.

The next “C” is civil rights. America will only be a great nation if we can discover a way to weave the threads of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity into a truly American tapestry. Our curse is our inability to discuss or address issues of race, almost 400 years after the first Africans landed at Jamestown. From slavery, through the Abolitionists, Jim Crow, Black Codes, De Facto and De Jure Segregation, the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Councils, the Niagara Movement, DuBois, Washington, the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panthers and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Voting Rights, Affirmative Action, and the Women’s Movement—as a nation we have demonstrated a total inability to effectively address issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

DuBois said the problem of the twentieth century was race. Unfortunately, the same is true as we embark upon the twenty-first century. Our blessing is that you bring a philosophy of inclusion, shared leadership, and a willingness to learn and understand from others. Your challenge is to take a leadership role in creating a community collaborative where citizens can openly and honestly discuss these issues and find ways for a dialogue on race and reconciliation. It is you who must make certain that the Bill of Rights applies to all Americans. The curse would be that you do nothing!

The fifth “C” is cities. You must embrace the value and importance of cities in American life. They represent civilization, a tie to our community’s history and culture, along with a sense of place, economic well-being, and social interaction. You must teach us how to nurture this important history and build upon it for the future—smartly, creatively, and with all available and willing community partners.

Of course, as a public servant, I urge all of you to consider a career in public service. It is a noble profession; and every single day, it touches the lives of all Americans. If you choose to work in local government, in our cities, the rewards are immediate, tangible, and direct as this is the level of

government directly responsible for the delivery of services to citizens. And trust me, citizens will call when their trash is not picked up, when the police took longer than a few minutes to respond to a request for service, or when there is a pothole down the street.

But they will also call to tell you that thanks to your efforts, their communities are safer, property values are appreciating, neighborhoods are vibrant, and they are sharing in a high quality of life.

An obvious part of the process of addressing the problems that face us as a society—of being able to achieve the blessing and not the curse—is examining the structure of government and determining how it can be better organized to do its job more efficiently and effectively. This must be a continuous activity, and one sufficiently dynamic and broadly based to resist those defenders of political turf who would argue for maintaining the status quo. As Cornel West advises us, our current political atmosphere is one in which images, not ideas, dominate, where politicians spend more time raising money than debating issues. The functions of political parties have been displaced by public polls, and politicians behave less as thermostats that determine the climate of public opinion than as thermometers registering the public mood. There are continual appeals to special interests rather than to public interests and such appeals foster polarization.

In Dayton I am working to create a high-performance organization, because I know we can and must run government better at the local level. Continuing with the way we do things will result in the devastation of our cities and threaten the life-blood of our communities. It will mean forsaking democracy, decency, and compassion.

If nothing else, citizens will no longer pay for business-as-usual, and if you happen to work in communities such as mine, you cannot afford business-as-usual because the city will literally be out of business. Business-as-usual saw the closure of manufacturing plants; the loss of downtown retail; and the flight of the middle class to the suburbs, leaving a concentration of poverty, aged infrastructure, and a diminished revenue base.

My philosophy or principle of a high-performance organization is founded in a vision for the organization that embodies the shared values of all employees and promotes the principles of management which support the

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organization's vision and values. Another aspect of this philosophy is an ongoing review of our systems, structures, and strategies to make certain they, too, are consistent with the vision and values and that we are walking the talk—our actions must support our standard operating procedures. A key element of the Dayton Performance Initiative is returning to the business of leadership. Leadership is needed at all levels of the organization. The separation of work under the Taylor Model of Management worked effectively in the old economy; but, in our new economy, everyone must think and do. As such, a different management model is needed, and I suggest it's the integration of leadership, management and work tasks that is the best model for our times.

I argue that we must again focus our attention on the public square, the common ground that undergirds our national and global destinies. The viability of any public square ultimately depends on how much we care about the quality of our lives together. I have come to learn that government cannot solve the problems facing our communities alone. Rather, success depends on our ability to forge coalitions and to collaborate with diverse groups and institutions. Our success demands nothing less than this collective thinking, the ability to leverage and target resources, and the enhanced opportunity for buy-in.

We must also be concerned about product and service quality, customer value of satisfaction, and financial performance. We must maintain the veneer of society as we are the glue that binds it.

As a public servant, you must develop personal integrity and ethics, political savvy, moral vision, and prudent judgement, and become courageously defiant and develop relentless patience. Most importantly, you must commit yourself to the higher moral purpose that differentiates government from the private sector.

Martin Luther King reminds us that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lead some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and nobler life.

As did James Baldwin, I believe fervently in the perpetual achievement of the impossible. And as a public servant this is exactly what you will be expected to accomplish. While at times the challenges may appear daunting, your vision, values, academic preparation, and moral grounding will steer you on the course of true north.

As you begin your public service careers, I charge you to become a coach, a benchmarker, a listener, a calculated risk-taker, an iconoclast, a mentor, and a champion of the ideas of others when this is the appropriate thing to do.

I charge you to become concerned and committed to serving the needs of all citizens, to be compassionate in dealing with those in need, and to be conscious of the legacy you leave for those who will follow. I charge you to become a leader, a visionary, and the model against which excellence can be measured.

You will need intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, and respect to meet my charge, and to secure the blessings of our shared future. Each of you can make a positive, profound difference if you commit to yourself to do so.

I have sought this evening to share my thoughts on the challenges and opportunities that await you as public administrators and environmental scientists. Let me now share the strong values of the black slave tradition passed down from the family of Paul Robeson:

First: Be the best you can possibly be, striving for perfection instead of trying merely to equal others.

Second: Remember that to succeed without advancing the interests of our children, without helping those who have fallen behind, is worthless.

Third: Acknowledge that the human race is one family with diverse but equal members, and a deeper understanding of one's own culture leads to a better appreciation of other cultures.

Fourth: Understand that personal growth based on inner motivation, rather than on the imitation of role models, is the mother of greatness, but its price is pain and perseverance.

Fifth: Temper strength and power with gentleness and compassion; combine courage and wisdom.

Sixth: Don't go along to get along; be willing to sacrifice for what you know is right.

Remember, no great discovery was ever made without a bold step, and the first step in the journey of a thousand miles is the first step. I challenge you to take that first bold step.

I'd like to end my remarks with a poem by my favorite poet, Langston Hughes:

*We have tomorrow before us like a flame.
Yesterday, a night-gone thing, a sun-down name.
And dawn today, broad arch above the road we came,
We march.*

Do take the road less traveled. Have the courage of your convictions and strive to leave your communities better, stronger, and more perfect than you found them.

Freedom is the soul of progress and essential to every phase of life. As a city manager, I have sought to promote democracy and add value to the quality of life in the communities I have served.

My faith is in the individual and in the capacity of free individuals to unite around a common vision and shared values to improve communities.

My faith is in you and your ability to create, out of change and chaos, better communities, better cities, and a better world. Remember, sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long and, in the end, it's only with yourself.

Valerie Lemmie, City Manager of the City of Dayton, Ohio, received her bachelor of arts degree in political science from the University of Missouri in 1973, and her master's degree in urban affairs and public planning from Washington University in St. Louis in 1975. She assumed the position of Dayton city manager in 1996, after serving as city manager in Petersburg, Virginia. In Dayton, Lemmie is responsible for 16 city departments, 3,000 full-time employees, and a city budget of \$800 million dollars. She interacts with citizen and community groups, develops creative solutions to urban problems, supervises the implementation of city policy, controls government finances, and provides continuity and support to the mayor and the city commission.

Lemmie delivered these remarks at the 2000 graduation recognition ceremony for the masters students at the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs in Bloomington.

A. James Barnes, dean of the School, said in his introduction of Lemmie, "Those on our faculty who teach the city managers of tomorrow have watched with excitement and anticipation as the City of Dayton continues its renaissance. The redevelopment of the riverfront, new downtown housing, the re-establishment of brownfields, and the development of a major new research park are accomplishments in which Valerie and others in the city's administration can take great pride."

