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Leadership and Service

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Leadership and Service What Are the Odds You Will Make a Difference?

By Ralph Hauenstein

Thank you for that kind introduction and for honoring me this day. It is especially an honor to share the day with you.

I've had the opportunity to speak with several graduating students, both here and in Florida where I spend the winter. By doing so, I hoped to gain some insight into your thoughts, your aspirations, and your views of the future.

Overall, I was encouraged. I found a strong commitment to community, a desire to contribute, and an ability to look beyond one's self to the needs of others. These are all qualities necessary for leadership and service. I also found great passion and a desire to succeed. But these latter sentiments were tempered. Quite frequently I heard the comment, "the odds are not good."

"The odds are not good?" My first response to that statement is, "The odds according to whom?"

I imagine if you watch the news with any regularity you have seen a rather pessimistic picture of America -- both economically and as it relates to our position in the world.

But I would say to you, we have been here before. I have been here before. As many of you may have astutely observed, I have a few years on you.

Along with all the little inconveniences of advancing age comes one very distinct advantage: an historic perspective. That is what I bring to you today. As both a student of and a participant in history, I encourage you to join me in examining some of the long odds throughout our country's past.

What were the odds of winning back in the 1770s, when a ragged, half-starved army under General Washington took on one of the world's superpowers, which had an army and navy far superior in numbers and professional training? I know the odds were not good because I knew George Washington and we talked about it.

What were the odds of succeeding back in the 1780s and '90s, when our founding fathers -- with little more than desire, determination, and an ideal -- established a new nation -- a nation that would eventually become humankind's greatest hope?

Tell me the odds of keeping our country intact in the 1860s, when the North and South could not reconcile their differences peacefully and fought each other in a civil war.

Again and again, America has defied the odds.

America has defied the odds because we Americans -- individual citizens like you and me -- have defied the odds. Those who are dedicated, who are courageous, who are visionary; those who hold fast to their ideals; those who don't lose faith -- these are the Americans who make a difference, who live good lives of leadership and service.

Let me share with you a personal story. It's a wartime story and one in which the odds appeared overwhelmingly unfavorable.

In the summer of 1943 -- in the middle of World War II, when things were not going well for the Allies -- I was assigned to London, to the United States Army's headquarters in the European Theater. It was there that we were planning a great coordinated attack on the enemy, which controlled most of the continent of Europe.

Our chances of success were small, indeed. An invading army had not crossed the English Channel since 1066 -- almost a thousand years. Not only did we have to cross this dangerous body of water; we had to do it with a sufficient number of troops to break through heavily fortified enemy positions. Once we broke through, we would come up against a full army with a thousand tanks and masses of heavy German artillery. How do you like those odds?

Well, we didn't either. But that didn't mean we weren't obligated to try to liberate the people of Europe. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill provided a key part of our strategy in one profound statement: "In wartime, truth is far too precious not to be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

Thus was born Project Bodyguard, a sophisticated intelligence operation that employed a myriad of highly classified activities that stretched from the Balkans to northern Norway. Once fully implemented, Project Bodyguard became part of the famous Overlord Operation.

The clever intelligence work succeeded. In the last week of May and first week of June 1944, we held an enormous army of enemy soldiers and equipment in place for 11 days. The Germans could not pinpoint where we would try to get a toehold on the Continent. Their confusion enabled the Allies to land more than 150,000 men on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, thus ensuring the success of the D-Day invasion.

The odds of succeeding had not been good -- not at all -- but we turned them in our favor. It didn't just happen. It took leaders of vision and courage -- men like Prime Minister Churchill and General Eisenhower -- to make it happen.

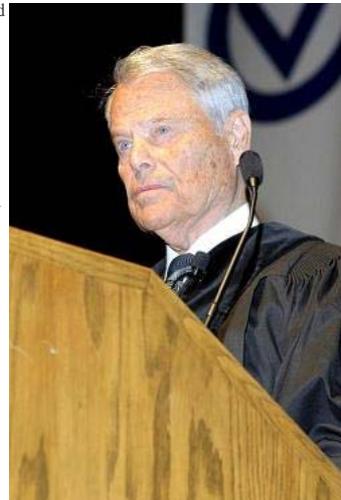
In the closing weeks of the European conflict, I was with the Allied forces on the Continent. I took part in the liberation of the infamous Dachau concentration camp. I saw atrocities that I will never get out of my mind: from starving men being forced to throw the bodies of their fellow prisoners into brick ovens, to an arrogant camp commander who was seated in a room glowing with light cast through lampshades made of human skin.

The scene was unimaginably horrific. It has remained with me nearly 60 years. But it also led to a decision point in my life.

Shortly after my discharge from the service, I returned to Europe to see how -- or even if -- these conquered people, whose character I questioned, could endure. I thought their odds of national survival were slim. Germany's infrastructure was in a shambles. Virtually all its industry was in ruins. Many people were half starved and living in fear and anxiety.

But I also met people who were determined to rebuild, who possessed the vision of a peaceful, prosperous Germany in the community of nations. It was these Germans who would serve and lead the country into a better future. So I decided to work with them -- and work with them in a way that would fit with American industry and markets. I'll give you an example.

While traveling through a small village in Germany, I met a man making baked goods in a small garage. Through a mostly hand-operated process, he was mixing dough and forming it into small fish-shaped snacks. Upon my return to America, I asked engineers to design equipment for mass production of a similar item. We shared our technology with the German baker, whose business grew and prospered. I then sold the equipment to a well-known American bakery, and for those of you who have ever enjoyed Goldfish crackers, you know the rest of the story.



For me, it was the beginning of a thriving import-export business. For the U.S. and Western Europe, it was a model of what could be.

Soon, the U.S. government recognized the same needs and opportunities that we had seen, and the Marshall Plan was born. This plan was a key element in America's efforts to rebuild war-torn Western Europe and to ensure its political and economic stability. Our world is much better off because leaders back in the 1940s and '50s ignored the odds, stuck courageously to their vision, and worked for a more peaceful, prosperous community of nations. Everyone in this room has benefited enormously from their steadfastness.

Well, that's a little history. What about the future? What about your future? What are the odds of your success?

I contend that, if you are going to be a leader, if you are going to serve your community and your country, then you must not be timid or resigned to come-what-may. You must take the future into your own hands to the extent that you are able. You must work to turn the odds in your favor.

Don't let yourself get down about pessimistic economic news. If the economy is going to rise out of an economic slump, all of us will have to think in new ways. Manufacturers will have to become more innovative, more creative, more efficient, more technically savvy.

And don't forget the amazing opportunities out there -- opportunities my generation never knew. A professor at Harvard Business School named Juan Enriquez recently wrote a book called *As the Future Catches You*. Enriquez believes the single most important discovery of the century is the sequencing of the human genome. This discovery is creating opportunities not only for scientists and mathematicians, but also for artists and architects, managers and sales people, social service workers and educators. In other words, for people with your educational background.

Not only that, but the Van Andel Institute, where I serve as trustee, is the western anchor of the Michigan life sciences corridor. Grand Valley State University and President Murray are among the institute's strong local partners in building the life sciences industry here in Grand Rapids.

So opportunities are abundant -- right in this community -- to be in on some pretty exciting action. Don't let gloomy economic news get you down. The odds can be turned in your favor. What are needed are courageous, visionary leaders. Are you one of them?

In your years of study at this university, you have acquired a foundation of knowledge and friendships that will sustain you throughout your lifetime. As to your future, I propose no nostrums, nor can I assuage any feelings of uncertainty you may have.

I can, however, affirm this: Your community needs you. Our country needs you. It needs you to fulfill the hopes of your fellow citizens and to affirm the promise that is being placed in your hands -- your degree.

I conclude with my congratulations. And I assure you that the odds are in your favor because this country offers you endless avenues of opportunity. Pursue them aggressively.

Ralph Hauenstein was awarded an honorary doctorate at at Grand Valley State University's graduation ceremony on April 24, 2004. The above text is excerpted from remarks delivered at the Van Andel Arena in Grand Rapids, Michigan.