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## Common Sense 2010 Address, delivered at GVSU Commencement on December 11, 2010

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Grand Valley State University Commencement Address  
“Common Sense 2010”  
December 11, 2010  
By Arend D. Lubbers, President Emeritus

Mr. President: It is a privilege in this 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year to address the graduates and those gathered around them. You are obligated to look toward the next fifty, but in celebrating the past it is appropriate for you to display some relics from the past, so here I am.

This summer our son-in-law became an American Citizen. He put on his new suit and went to a Chicago court to take his oath. The judge was eloquent and he found himself more emotionally moved than he expected. Our family converged on our house a week later to honor him. Before dinner we sat down together to read from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Listen to these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – that to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their Powers from the consent of the Governed.”

We closed with the first amendment. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to

“assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Some of us A became teary-eyed hearing again the declaration of our rights and the protection of them.

When I reflected after the strong emotions hearing these words had on all of us, as we welcomed our family member into the great family of American citizens, I thought to myself the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution make common sense. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment and the political and religious experiences on the European Continent and in Great Britain had come together in the minds of people who lived along the Eastern seaboard of North America. In a little over two decades they fought for and forged a new covenant that provided all individuals with more liberty, freedom, and opportunity than had ever been experienced. It shook the world and it all made sense.

In 1776 an English immigrant journalist, Thomas Paine in Philadelphia, published a pamphlet entitled Common Sense that stirred the colonists. It made a compelling case for America against the tyrannies of Britain. John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, a former friend, thought him a rabble rouser, but I think he put some fire in Thomas Jefferson’s belly. Whatever the circumstances then the circumstances now made me think the turmoil in our politics and foreign policy

now require a dose of common sense; just as the times at our nation's birth required C it. Hence the title of these remarks, and a compliment to Thomas Paine, whose title I have plagiarized.

The application of common sense begins at the level of the individual. A large number of people must practice it if it is to be made manifest in society and the body politic. Sometimes in our national life when we didn't know where to turn, or when we were polarized to the point of near destruction, or in economic peril and threatened from without, a beleaguered hero made the right decisions and led us to sensible outcomes. George Washington at the beginning, Abraham Lincoln when we nearly destroyed what we had, and Franklin Roosevelt when democracy itself was threatened; contemplating these things in depth, I searched for my anchors of common sense, and found them in the words of three people whose lives I have studied all my adult life.

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1947, Winston Churchill said in the House of Commons, "It has been said that Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." He tells me democracy doesn't always produce good results, he implies that liberty isn't forever unless we discipline ourselves to protect it. He implies keeping it may require sacrifice. The great hall of Parliament where these words were uttered stands as a symbol of the

essential ingredients of democracy; the majority prevails, the minority has protected rights, and compromise is of ultimate necessity to making it work. It all makes sense to me, but the way we practice it sometimes grinds me.

Steven Colbert, the humorist, has given us a new word born out of the sound bite ads of the recent campaign. It is truthiness. Truthiness describes an ad that takes a true fact, presents it out of context, and the result is an untruth; commonly called a lie. What am I to do about the gutter politics? First, is to understand that in other forms truthiness has been practiced long before the word was coined. Second, is to stay engaged in politics. Third, don't stoop to gutter politics myself. Fourth, keep myself well-informed about issues — after all, we are entering an uncharted time of global transformation, the effects of which will reach every home in America. So my voice and my vote should reflect information, thought, and reason.

Around two thousand years ago Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged. And whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt back to you.” If you're nasty, you get nasty back. If you condemn you get condemnation. He does not say don't make judgments, but He is issuing a warning. If you get into mudslinging and give those who oppose you no quarter, you may find you are contributing to an unredeemable

human situation. He does not say don't fight for what you believe, but He says how you fight may be as important to right living as your objective.

He is implying that we really do not have the right to judge others because our human condition does not include the ability to do so. We are in our own skin; we cannot completely get into another's. Listening to some of the recent political campaign rhetoric you might think final pronouncements on people are ours to make. I yearn for a time when views are put forth in a reasonable manner and voters make their decisions without the confusion created by truthiness and condemnation. The misinterpretation and noise emanating from candidates often reflects the confusion among the electorate. When we have not understood what is happening, and it is difficult to do so in a world that is in a period of exponential change, we are likely to vote in a state of aroused emotions or not at all. But I know, too, that many have made their judgments as best they can and voted their convictions. The majority rules but what if there is not a clear majority? How does the body politic function? Compromise? That requires giving up some judging.

In my public and personal life I have tried to incorporate the judging concept Jesus spoke to his followers on the mount. It is hard, very hard. But it makes sense to me.

Abraham Lincoln had just been reelected; the bitter war with its hatred and deaths was drawing to a close. No President before or since has been demonized more than he, and what did he say at this awesome and terrible time from the inaugural platform of the new capital? “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds.....to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and all nations.” Despite all the ensuing injustices, especially to Black Americans, the post war generations captured enough of Lincoln’s spirit to bind up wounds and let those who had fallen away come back into the light of liberty as equals as the Declaration defined and the Constitution protected.

I have friends who say “I hate Obama.” I have friends who said, “I hate Bush.” I feel uncomfortable when I hear such expressions. I have no problem with disagreeing with the policies and decisions of Obama and Bush. Our first generation of Americans gave us that opportunity and right. But hatred carries malice, and malice creates hardness, and hardness diminishes our capacity to make democracy function in the best interests of all. This beleaguered President about to be assassinated, through the trials of his personal life and his Presidency, was given

spiritual insight that guided us then and should guide us now. It makes common sense.

The traditional commencement address is an obstacle on the way to the business of the day. Since most could easily forgo it, and graduates are not seeking advice at this event, I used my preparation time to reflect on where I am as a citizen at this stage of my life, and how my public and personal beliefs coincide. The only advice I will give is that you do the same periodically.

In September, the Grand Rapids Symphony opened their concert season with a stirring rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner”. I felt it from the “top of my head to the tip of my toes.” I am a patriotic guy. I am moved when it is played at every ballgame I attend. I don’t think there is an ounce of chauvinism in my patriotism. My patriotism flows from gratitude; gratitude that I was born at a time after all the thinkers and common citizens of several places had awakened the spirit of liberty and defined democracy where liberty flourishes. I live in the land of the free and the home of the brave, and so do you. Let’s keep it that way.