

POLITICS

# A Radically Woke and Deeply Conservative Commencement Address

At Pomona College, Danielle Allen spoke about the Declaration of Independence and its electric cord.

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF JUN 12, 2018



HANNAH MCKAY / REUTERS

In a more equal world, Danielle Allen would be a lousy public

speaker to offset her almost comically impressive resume. As an undergraduate at Princeton, she won a Marshall Scholarship to Cambridge. Then she completed a doctoral degree in classics and accepted a job at the University of Chicago. In her first four years there, while turning her dissertation on democratic Athens into a book and winning tenure, she also earned a second doctoral degree, “this time at Harvard, this time in government, this time with a dissertation focused on the contemporary United States, on potential civic implications of *Brown v. Board of Education*.”

I’m quoting the person who introduced her as a speaker at the Pomona College commencement ceremony last month. He went on to say that she was soon given a joint appointment at the University of Chicago, earned a promotion to full professor, and was appointed dean of the humanities division when she was just 33 years old. She went on to win a MacArthur Fellowship and now leads an ethics center at Harvard, where she has earned the highest faculty honors.

Had she flubbed her speech, we could all feel better about ourselves.

But talent being unequal, her remarks were among the best I’ve encountered at this year’s graduations. Allen insisted that young Americans ought to hold democracy and their civic duties within it in higher regard. And she did so with a challenging, deeply accessible analysis of the Declaration of Independence that was, I think, equally likely to engage and discomfit ambitious careerists, woke progressives, and Claremont-Institute-style conservatives.

Her speech is relatively short, best watched, and begins at 1:08:22.

After a cursory introduction, she said:

I know you've come here for many reasons. I believe that many of you, despite what you may say about the life of the mind, have come here for a job. And I am sure you will succeed. This place has equipped you.

And I am sure many of you have also come to enrich yourselves as human beings—to find the connections that your colleagues spoke about so eloquently. I worried, to be honest, before coming, that you had not come here to find your civic purpose. The data that we read about suggests that young people don't much care for democracy anymore.

For instance, only 30 percent of people born in the most recent generation consider democracy essential to our way of life. And

25 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds think that democracy is either a bad or very bad way of running things. I can tell that you are not apathetic, I have learned that this morning. Nonetheless, the work of democracy is hard. And before you leave I want to share a few more thoughts on that subject of preparing yourself for your civic responsibilities.

For the last 20 years, for reasons that are too complicated to explain in this moment, I have been journeying with the Declaration of Independence.

Many of you will be skeptical of the worth of that text. You think that it was written by Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner. Let me just tell you one important lesson: If you want credit for something, put it on your tombstone. Jefferson's tombstone says, "Author, Declaration of Independence."

That's why he gets the credit.

In fact, it was written by a committee. He happened to chair the committee, and it's true that he wrote the first draft. But the other members of the committee, and in particular John Adams, man of Massachusetts who never owned slaves and thought slavery was a bad thing, were just as important as intellectual architects of the document.

Adams is my favorite of that Founding generation.

Let me just ask you to think through with me ... about what I take to be the pithiest, most efficient lesson in the conduct of citizenship and civic agency there is. I say citizenship and civic

agency because citizenship is not about a formal status, it is about empowerment and taking responsibility for your world. So here is the shortest lesson there is:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are 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 just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.*

Tell the truth: Do you remember it was that long?

It's not *just* about individual rights—about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—it moves from those rights to the notion that government is something that we build together to secure our safety and happiness.

Were you listening closely?

We have two jobs: laying the foundation on principle—clarify your values, know what you stand for; and organize the power of government to secure those rights, to effect of safety and happiness. The best we can do is figure out what is most likely to effect our safety and happiness. We make probabilistic judgments. We make mistakes! We have to enter into the

business of democratic agency *with humility*.

And this job of laying the foundation of principle and connecting it to how we organize the powers of government entails two important things.

That foundation of principle, what does it amount to?

The sentence gives us some ideas. It says we have these rights, *among which* are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Among which! It's examples, people!

It's not a complete list! The job of thinking is not done.

*It is your job.* All right?

Clarify your values. Maybe you care about sustainability. Maybe you care about gender equality. Maybe you care about free markets and capitalism.

But connect them to the basic question of what is good for our community together. A shared story. And then, don't forget: Activism is valuable, no question about it, but our job at the end of the day is to build institutions that secure our shared rights. That means understanding the user manual. All right? The institutions. And yes, we can alter them. They're not given in perpetuity. Originalism is about understanding democratic empowerment, which is about recognizing that democratic citizens build and change their world.

All right?

You lay the foundation on principle—and that requires talking to each other and everybody else—and figure out how to organize the powers of government. Understand the user manual well enough to use it and modify it.

All right.

So I'll leave you again with my last lesson for you, for your civic preparation:

We hold these truths to be self-evident.

That all men are created equal.

That they are 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 people, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

That whenever *any* Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.

Laying its foundation on such *principles* and organizing its powers in such form, as to *US* shall seem most likely to effect *Our* safety and happiness.

Congratulations, class of 2018.

After her speech, as the applause died down, the person who followed her at the lectern said, “Now *that’s* woke.” And he was right—it was infinitely more woke than those who spread the pernicious falsehood that the principles of the Declaration are valuable only to “cis white men” or any less the birthright of people of color.

It reminded me of a Fourth of July address that President Abraham Lincoln once delivered, addressing not only those who could trace their lineage back to the founding generation, with claims to shared blood, but also the immigrants—my ancestors among them—who came to the United States in later generations.

Said Lincoln, in part:

We are now a mighty nation ... We run our memory back over the pages of history for about eighty-two years and we discover that we were then a very small people in point of numbers, vastly inferior to what we are now ... with vastly less of everything we deem desirable among men.

We look upon the change as exceedingly advantageous to us and to our posterity, and we fix upon something that happened away back, as in some way or other being connected with this rise of prosperity. We find a race of men ... whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men, they fought for the principle that they were contending for; and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity that we now enjoy has come to us.

We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the



good done in this process ... and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves—we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit.

In every way we are better men in the age, and race, and country in which we live for these celebrations. But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it.

We have besides these men, descended by blood from our ancestors, perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian...

If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, (loud and long continued applause) and so they are.

That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds

of men throughout the world.

May that electric cord continue to unite us.