

Michelle Obama (born 1964) is an American lawyer and the former First Lady of the United States. In the online speech, given in June 2020, she addresses high school and college graduates in the USA.

Michelle Obama

## Dear Class of 2020

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Hey, everybody.

It is an honor to be here with you to help celebrate this amazing milestone in your lives. Graduation from college or high school is a culmination of years of hard work, so please enjoy this moment. You deserve this celebration. Congratulations.

5 This is an important time of transition. In light of the current state of our country, I struggle to find the right words of wisdom for you today, so I am here today to talk to you, not as the former First Lady, but as a real-life person, a mother, a mentor, a citizen concerned about your future and the future of our country. Because right now, all that superficial stuff of titles and positions, all of that has been stripped away. And a lot of us are reckoning with the most basic essence of who we are. Over these past couple of months, our  
10 foundation has been shaken. Not just by a pandemic that stole too many of our loved ones, upended our daily lives, and sent tens of millions into unemployment. But also by the rumbling of the age-old fault lines that our country was built on. The lines of race and power that are now once again so nakedly exposed for all of us to grapple with.

15 So, if any of you are scared, or confused or angry or just plain overwhelmed by it all, if you feel like you're searching for a lifeline just to steady yourself, you are not alone. I am feeling all of that, too. I think we all are. So I want you to know that it's okay to be confused, it's okay if you don't understand exactly what you're feeling. We're all sorting through this in real time.

20 But here's the thing. While this period is certainly unprecedented, it is not a complete anomaly, simply some random coincidence to be dismissed. No, what's happening right now is the direct result of decades of unaddressed prejudice and inequality. The truth is, when it comes to all those tidy stories of hard work and self-determination that we like to tell ourselves about America, well, the reality is a lot more complicated than that. Because for too many people in this country, no matter how hard they work, there are structural barriers working against them that just make the road longer and rockier. And sometimes it's  
25 almost impossible to move upward at all. Because if you're required to work during a pandemic, but don't have enough protective equipment, or health insurance from your employer, or paid sick leave, well, what is more essential, your work, or your life? If you don't feel safe driving your own car in your own neighborhood or going for a jog, or buying some candy at 7-Eleven, or bird watching<sup>1</sup>, if you can't even approach the police without fearing for your life, well, then how do you begin to chart your own course?

30 And as so often is the case these questions compound upon themselves. So, if you're struggling already just to keep your head above water, if you're living in a constant state of fear, how much farther behind will you be after months in quarantine and without a job? These are uncomfortable questions. Questions that have dogged this country for generations but are now staring us in the face every time we look at our phones or hear helicopters circling our neighborhoods.

35 And the tough part is nobody has all the answers. If my generation did, trust me, we'd have fixed all of this a long time ago. But that doesn't mean we should feel hopeless. Just the opposite. Because what we finally do have is focus. We see what's happening in stark relief. We see how these inequalities are playing out on our streets. And it's not just the communities most affected by these challenges that see it now. It's folks all

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<sup>1</sup> *If you don't feel safe...bird watching*: references to specific incidents of race related violence and harassment

across the country, who, for too long, have had the luxury and privilege of looking away. We all have no choice but to see what has been staring us in the face for years, for centuries.

40 So the question is, how will we respond?

Like I said before, I don't have any easy answers for you. But I do have some lessons I want to share about how to move forward in these tumultuous times. The first is this. Life will always be uncertain. It is a lesson that most of us get the chance to learn over the course of years and years, even decades, but one that you're learning right now. This is a time in your life when it feels like everything is turned upside down. And perhaps you're wishing that things could just go back to the way they were.

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Look, I've been there many times in my life.

I felt it most profoundly when my father and my best friend died within a year of each other. I was in my late 20s. And it felt like my whole world was collapsing in on itself. I would have given anything, anything to bring them back. But that experience gave me a kind of clarity. With everything in pieces around me, I had to forge a new path. A path, fortunately, more focused on meaning and service.

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So, graduates, I hope that what you're going through right now can be your wake-up call. That it pushes you, not just to think about what kind of career you want to build, but what kind of person do you want to be.

And here's the thing. You have the opportunity to learn these valuable lessons faster than the generations before you. And you can learn them together, as a cohort of young people ready to take on the world, no matter how tumultuous it may be.

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And that leads me to my second lesson. In an uncertain world, time-tested values like honesty and integrity, empathy and compassion, that's the only real currency in life. Treating people right will never, ever fail you.

Now, I'm not naive. I know that you can climb a long way up the ladder selling falsehoods and blaming others for your own shortcomings, shunning those with less privilege and advantage. But that is a heavy way to live. It deadens your spirit and it hardens your heart. It may seem like a winning strategy in the short run, but trust me, graduates, that kind of life catches up to you. You rob yourself of the things that matter most, deep and loving connections with others, honest work that leads to lasting contributions to your community, the vibrancy that comes from a diversity of ideas and perspectives. The chance to leave this world a little better than you found it. Don't deprive yourselves of all that. There is no substitute for it.

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Instead, make a decision to use your privilege and your voice for the things that really matter.

Which is my third lesson today, to share that voice with the rest of the world.

For those of you who feel invisible, please know that your story matters. Your ideas matter. Your experiences matter. Your vision for what our world can and should be matters.

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So don't ever, ever let anyone tell you that you're too angry or that you should keep your mouth shut.

There will always be those who want to keep you silent, to have you be seen but not heard. Or maybe they don't even want to see you at all. But those people don't know your story. And if you listen to them, then nothing will ever change.

75 So, it's up to you to speak up when you or someone you know isn't being heard.

It's up to you to speak out against cruelty, dishonesty, bigotry, all of it.

It's up to you to march hand in hand with your allies, to stand peacefully with dignity and purpose on the front lines in the fight for justice.

80 And here's the last part. It's up to you to couple every protest with plans and policies, with organizing, and mobilizing, and voting.

And that's my final piece of advice. Graduates, anger is a powerful force. It can be a useful force, but left on its own, it will only corrode and destroy and sow chaos on the inside and out. But when anger is focused, when it's channeled into something more, oh, that is the stuff that changes history.

85 Dr. King was angry. Sojourner Truth was angry. Lucretia Mott, Cesar Chavez<sup>2</sup>, the folks at Stonewall<sup>3</sup>, they were all angry.

90 But those folks were also driven by compassion, by principle, by hope. And so they took advantage of whatever resources they had in their own time. Thundering from the pulpit and the convention floor, penning letters from a jail cell, standing up for their rights in the face of police violence. They built coalitions with folks like them and different from them. They got fluent in the language of power. They sat down with leaders they disagreed with because they knew that if they wanted their vision to be made real, it needed to be made law. It needed to be voiced not just on the streets, but in the halls of power. It needed to be carried not just by the housekeeper and the shift worker, but by the senator and the congresswoman, and, yes, the President of the United States.

So, graduates, it is your time now.

95 And, look, our democracy isn't perfect. But I have travelled the world and seen the governments and people in so many other countries. And I can tell you that our democracy is sturdy, and yes, it still works.

But it doesn't work if you silence yourselves. It does not work if you disengage from the process. And we're seeing the consequences of that right now. But if you hold strong with the same faith that carried all those giants before you toward real, measurable progress, you will change the course of history.

100 So what does that mean for your time?

It starts where change always starts. In your own home. In your own social circles. In your own neighborhoods. At your own dinner tables.

Sometimes it's easier to stand with strangers at a protest than it is to challenge someone in your own backyard.

105 So if you hear people expressing bigoted views or talking down to "those people," it is up to you to call them out. Because we won't solve anything if we're only willing to do what's easiest. We've got to make hard choices and sacrifices in our own lives.

So if you're spending a lot of time just hashtagging and posting right now – That's useful, especially during a pandemic, but it's only a beginning.

110 Go further. Send all your friends a link to register to vote. Text everybody you know to join you in exercising their constitutional right to protest. Ask yourself, "Do you know where your polling place is?" "Do you know when your primary elections are held?" "Do you know how to request a mail-in ballot?" "Who are the incumbents and the candidates at every level of government?" Not just president, but state representative, city council, prosecutor, sheriff.

115 And don't just ask yourselves these questions. Ask your friends, your family. Ask everyone you see in your neighborhood. And while we're reaching out, please let's give everyone who's working toward progress, space to be themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dr. King, Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, Cesar Chavez*: American civil rights activists

<sup>3</sup> *the folks at Stonewall*: activists demonstrating for LGBT rights in New York City in 1969

120 Everybody's got to vote when the time comes. But the activism that leads up to that day comes in many forms. Some want to march right up in front. Others prefer to stay back. Some kneel in the pews, others on the street corner. Some canvas their neighborhoods, others run for office. Some do an honest day's work and raise good kids, others choose to focus on their education and use that degree to address these issues and build a better life for themselves and those around them.

125 Graduates, it's all important, and we need every bit of it. So we cannot allow our hurt and our frustration to turn us against each other, to cancel somebody else's point of view if we don't agree with every last bit of their approach. That kind of thinking only divides us and distracts us from our higher calling. It is the gum in the wheel of progress.

Graduates, this is how you can finish the work that the generations before you have started. By staying open and hopeful, even in the tough times. By channeling that discomfort you feel into activism, and a democracy that was designed to respond to those who vote.

130 And here's the thing, I know you can do it. Because over these many years, I have seen exactly who you are. I've seen your creativity, and your talent, and your resourcefulness. I've seen you speaking out to end gun violence and fight climate change. I've seen you gathering donations for those in need during this pandemic. I have seen you marching with peace and with purpose.

And that is why, even in tough times like these, you continue to be what gives me hope.

135 Graduates, you all are exactly what we need right now, and for the years and decades to come. You're learning so much, so quickly. And I know that, not only can you do better than those who came before you, you will.

So it's your time. I love you all. I believe in you all. I want you to be safe. And I can't wait to see you take the reins.

140 Congratulations again on your graduation.

God bless you.

(2020)