

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESIDENT TED CARTER

AUGUST 2021 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

I'm excited to be here. What an honor to be able to give this commencement address. I'm really proud of the Class of 2020 and the fact that they got to come back and have an in-person graduation. For the class of 2021 who are graduating this summer—and all their family and friends, as well as our faculty and staff—this is a celebration for all of you.

You've heard the word *grit* a lot today. When I came here two years ago, you were just finishing up the 150-year anniversary of the founding of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Part of that celebration was the phrase "In our grit, our glory." Who would have ever thought at that time—when we had no idea that something like COVID-19 was on the horizon—that the word *grit* would become such an integral part of who you are.

And now here you are. You have truly shown your grit. You have shown that you can do it, and today is a celebration for each and every one of you. You've done something that very few can do.

I'm going to spend just a couple of minutes reflecting, because this is a time like no other in our US history—a global pandemic, an economic crisis, racial inequities, all coming at us at the same time. We really haven't seen anything like this since the global pandemic of 1918, the Great Depression, and World War II. We are truly at a unique moment in history.

"YOU HAVE TRULY SHOWN YOUR GRIT. YOU HAVE SHOWN THAT YOU CAN DO IT, AND TODAY IS A CELEBRATION FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU."



When I reflect on this, and who could provide some words that might inspire us, I think back to one of the greatest American heroes I've ever had a chance to meet: Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale.

You may remember James Bond Stockdale. He was a vice-presidential running mate with Ross Perot, but that's not why he was an American hero. He was a naval aviator and a Naval Academy graduate. He was shot down and taken prisoner during the Vietnam War; one of the first prisoners taken.

He was a prisoner in the Hanoi Hilton for seven-and-a-half years. Four of those years were in solitary confinement, and two of those years were in leg irons. Somehow he came out of there—in some part thanks to his wife Sybil, who fought our own Navy, our own military, our own government—to tell the truth about torture.

He suffered indescribable torture. But when he finally got out of solitary confinement, he started a way to communicate with his fellow prisoners-of-war to lift their spirits. Because James Bond Stockdale was much more than a fighter pilot. He was a thinker. He was a philosopher. And through a tapped code through the walls of the Hanoi prisons, he said to his fellow prisoners, "Have faith that you will persevere, but have the discipline to face your reality."



I can't think of a time in our nation's history when that phrase, known today as the Stockdale Paradox, is more true. Faith and hope versus reality. The reality is: we're not done with COVID-19. We probably won't be for long time—but we're living with it, we're managing it, and we're here.

There are going to be other grand challenges in front of you besides a pandemic. Looking out on all the talent and brainpower out there, it will be difficult for this cadre—the people, the friends, the family that are in the stands—to solve these problems.

“YOU WILL LEAVE HERE WITH THE IDEA OF PERSEVERANCE, OF EMPATHY, OF A SENSE OF CHARACTER AND HONOR FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILIES, AND OF WISDOM.”



Problems like food and water security for a population of 7.8 billion people across our planet today. We are one of the largest producers of agricultural food for not just Nebraska, but the world. By the year 2050, the world's population will be 9.7 billion—but we won't have any more water than we do today. We're going to have to be smarter with how we feed the world.

Technology is moving so fast. Everybody in this arena today has a cell phone. The cell phones we carry today have much more computing power and technology than the most advanced fighter jet I ever flew. But more important is how vulnerable we are. There's no more off-ramp to paper and pencil. We've seen it recently: airlines shutting down, networks stopped for food, energy issues. We are vulnerable. Who is going to secure our networks with cyberattacks happening at an alarming rate?

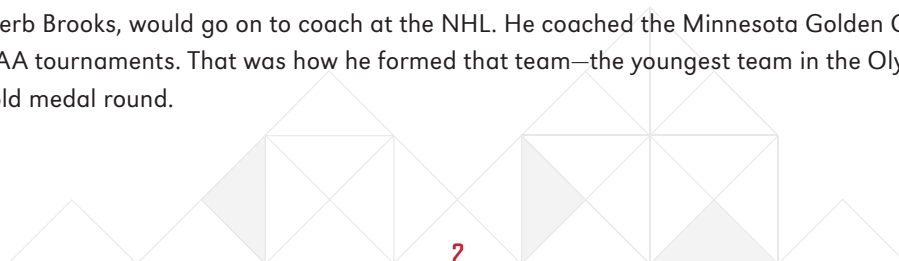
And then the weather. We can argue whether it's climate change or global warming...it doesn't matter what you call it, the weather is changing. 100-year weather events are happening now annually. Just a week ago, Omaha got six-and-a-half inches of rain in less than two hours. And we've seen weather change here in Nebraska through drought and floods.

You might think all these problems are somewhere else. Yes, they're the world's problems, but they're also ours. A reminder of how much the world's problems affect us hit me when I went outside a couple of weeks ago. I saw the smoke in the air, and realized it's not somebody burning a field somewhere. It's wildfires from Oregon and California—and now, Montana—from half a country away. And the smoke keeps moving, headed to New York City and Washington DC.

The point is: a crisis for anyone is a crisis for everyone. Who's going to solve these problems? Who's going to fix them? As my wife Lynda told me before I came up here, “Don't be a doom and gloomer.” I'm here to tell you the future is sitting right in front of me.

I played hockey when I was at the Naval Academy. (I'm more of a hockey fan than hockey player these days.) But when I was at the Naval Academy, one of the greatest sports achievements that ever occurred was the 1980 Winter Olympics. Team USA—a bunch of college hockey players—would go on to take on the greatest Olympic Team that was ever formed, a professional group of hockey players called the Soviet Red Army.

Their coach, Herb Brooks, would go on to coach at the NHL. He coached the Minnesota Golden Gophers and won three NCAA tournaments. That was how he formed that team—the youngest team in the Olympics—and got them to the gold medal round.



On February 22nd, 1980, Brooks stood in the locker room with his team. A week prior at Madison Square Garden, the Soviet Olympic hockey team walloped the USA hockey team in front of a huge TV audience, ten to three. There was no chance they could beat the Soviets in this gold medal game.

But Brooks stood there and looked each and every one of his players in the eye, and he said, “It’s your time. Their time is over. Go out there and take it.” And they did.

Mike Eruzione scored with five minutes left in the game and a four to three score. The Americans held on! That was the game where broadcaster Al Michaels said the famous *Do you believe in miracles?* line. It may be the greatest David-Goliath storybook ending that’s ever been told.

It was their time.

As I think about the future and these grand challenges, I realize: graduates of 2020 and 2021 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, *it is your time.*

It is your time, because you are the generation that knows it’s not about me, it’s about we. You are the generation that understands that there’s something out there that’s bigger than yourselves. It is that point that I ask you to think about and commit to today as you celebrate.

“YOU ARE THE GENERATION THAT KNOWS IT’S NOT ABOUT ME, IT’S ABOUT WE. YOU ARE THE GENERATION THAT UNDERSTANDS THAT THERE’S SOMETHING OUT THERE THAT’S BIGGER THAN YOURSELVES.”

Commit to being your best self. And when I say your best self, it’s to get us past the next problem. We’ve lost trust in most of the leaders of our largest institutions here in the United States. Leaders used to be able to get up at a podium and say something, and everybody would just say, “Yup, that’s how it is.”

When it comes to elected officials, people that are sworn to protect us, medical officials, even our military sworn to support and defend our constitution and our nation—we’re questioning whether or not they’re doing their jobs very well.

The only way we get back that trust is to increase the trust that we have in each other, our peers. We won’t find the answer by going to our phone and looking at Facebook or Twitter, Instagram or TikTok. We need to talk more to each other, have civil discourse, find a way of healing so that we can all serve a common good, a common purpose. So that we can bring back trust.

It’s your time because you’ve had values instilled in you from one of the greatest universities—not just in the United States, but in the world. You will leave here with the idea of perseverance, of empathy, of a sense of character and honor for yourself and your families, and of wisdom.

It’s your time because you understand service. You don’t have to have a patch on your arm to have honor. You don’t have to be an elected official. You don’t have to serve in the military.

Go be your best self and follow your passion. We need you. Class of 2020 and class of 2021, congratulations. You are about to become alumni, Huskers forever, Go Big Red forever.

It’s your time. Go out there and take it.