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University, Mississippi  
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### COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Chancellor Turner.....  
Members of the Board of Trustees.....  
Members of the Faculty.....  
Members of the Graduating Class.....

And, most of all, those with whom I have shared a common responsibility, multiplied by two, you parents who made it all possible.

And, if you will permit a personal reference, a remembrance to my own parents, my mother especially and my father who would have been so proud that their son had been chosen to address you.

This is the only Commencement Address I will make today\*. But as I thought about my Commencement Address and the speaker at that other school about a hundred miles from here, I got to wondering how my present positioning came about.

I have two theories.

The first, that other school learned that I was to be the Commencement speaker at the University of Mississippi. They wanted to play one-upmanship and the only way they knew how was to invite the President of the United States.

My second theory is that Chancellor Turner heard that President Bush would deliver the Mississippi State Commencement Address. And, he wanted to play one-upmanship.

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\* This introduction refers to the two Commencement Addresses delivered by President Bush on the same day of the University of Mississippi graduation.

I am happy to be here with you on this joyous, yet serious occasion!

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It was forty-nine years ago – a half century less one year! – when I received my degree from the University of Mississippi.

For those who share my weakness in higher math, that would make the year 1940.

Thinking back to the time of my own graduation, how would I have felt about a Commencement speaker who had graduated in 1890 – the identical time span that separates me from you?

After making certain he had a sturdy cane, I most certainly would have questioned whether our widely separated generations shared any common ground. For, truly, in 1940 I would have considered a graduate of the Class of '90 (that's 1890!) a genuine antique – a remnant of the distant past, separated from the 20<sup>th</sup> century by about the same distance as you are from the 21<sup>st</sup>.

But despite what my mirror may tell me, I don't feel that way about myself. I find myself generously overlooking the chronological bridge between our generations and focusing on the needs and aspirations, the visions and values common to all of us in a civilized society.

True enough, the Ole Miss you know is somewhat different from the Ole Miss which, for four of the most memorable and pleasant years of my life, nurtured me.

But I would hope that the essence of the Ole Miss experience has continued through the years, that you got as much from your years on this magnificent campus as I got from mine.

I remember my first trip to Oxford. September 1936. Hot as blazes. A Greyhound bus from my home in Memphis to Holly Springs. Then a transfer to a smaller bus that traversed the 20 miles or so to Oxford over a mostly gravel road. Air conditioned buses? Forget it! They came later.

Enrollment my first year was just short of 1400; my senior year it was 1600. Literally, one knew just about everybody. A cardinal rule of campus conduct was “Everyone Speaks”. And, really, everyone did!

I had to earn my own way. As campus correspondent for *The Commercial Appeal*. That paid \$50 to \$60 a month. It may be difficult for you to believe, but that was almost enough to cover my expense, including out-of-state tuition.

A book of meal tickets cost \$12. If you went light on desserts, it would last almost a month.

But to us the cost of living was outrageously high. At The Greeks, the campus gathering place, a small hamburger was a nickel, a big one a dime, a Coke a nickel. No one tipped. A Coke-and-hamburger date cost almost 50 cents!

Only seniors with special permission could have cars. So almost everyone walked – or took the cabs that cruised University Avenue. They had the nerve to charge 10 cents a ride.

The Lyric movie theater in downtown Oxford charged 25 cents. For the premier showing of “Gone With the Wind,” it soared to 40 cents – the premium price precipitated a near riot.

One of my great accomplishments as a student was that I was among the first occupants of the new dormitory, Leavell. I got to live in a brand new room because I was a special favorite of the then-Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds.

And, speaking of dormitories, there were only three for women at that time. And let it be said that no male ever transcended beyond the front parlor. Even the plumbers were female.

I was lucky when I graduated. I had a job. With *The Commercial Appeal*. My salary was \$15 a week, not very much even then. But when I got a raise, it was a whopper: It went to \$25 a week. That was less than I made in my junior and senior years at Ole Miss when I was both correspondent for *The Commercial Appeal* and Director of the Ole Miss News Bureau.

In fact, I plotted to stay on at Ole Miss after getting my B.A., but the then-Chancellor, Dr. Alfred Benjamin Butts wisely persuaded me to get on with my

life. It was good advice even though it meant a severe loss in income and a reduction in my lavish lifestyle.

Dr. Butts is among my icons. His contribution to this institution, though seldom mentioned nowadays, was enormous. When he became Chancellor, the University of Mississippi was not on the approved list of the college accrediting agencies because the politicians interfered in the appointment of faculty members. For several years, credits earned at the University of Mississippi were not accepted by other colleges when students wanted to transfer or by graduate schools.

When Dr. Butts was appointed as Chancellor by a new Governor, his goal was to restore accreditation. He was a stern taskmaster and a no-nonsense moralist. For him, it was right or wrong – no gray areas. He suffered neither fools nor short-cutters. His goal was to restore accreditation and he succeeded after his second year as Chancellor.

He deserves to be remembered. Under his guidance, the University gained in repute as a serious institution of learning.

I left Memphis soon after graduation to go to New York. I knew early on – even before high school – that the central core of my life’s work would involve writing. In those days, New York and Hollywood were the two big markets for people with writing ambitions. New York was more my style and became my choice. Despite that devastating blow, Hollywood managed to survive. All this is by way of preface to sharing with you briefly the career experience that has served me well and that may yield a useful nugget or two for you.

It was gained at the public relations firm that has been the centerpiece of my life – Burson-Marsteller. In practical, real world terms, let me tell you what it takes to make it at the company that bears my name. It’s pretty much what it takes to make it in almost any business, any profession you are likely to enter. And it applies to any size enterprise, because I have seen it work from the time we were one of the smallest firms in our field to today when we are the largest.

The first characteristic of our star performers is that they are reasonably intelligent. Those who don’t come to us with top grade points averages make up for it by being well organized and developing what we in New York call “street smarts.”

Another characteristic I note is that our best people are highly motivated. They're self-starters, they seek out the next new task; in many instances, they create their next task. They never wait to be told what to do next.

And then there is the ability to communicate – both the written and spoken word. But don't get me started on that because I have a personal sense of despair about the current decline in writing skills. I could harangue you at length about a generation raised facing a television tube. Those in that generation are invariably uncomfortable with the printed word. The first law of communication could well be that those who don't read, can't write.

Intelligence. Motivation. Communication.

But if I had to pick one characteristic vital to success in any field I know of, it would be what we might call the People Factor .....the ability to relate to and work with other people.

Recently we made an analysis of reasons for employee separation at our firm. What we found was that in fully 80 percent of cases – four out of five – the real problem was the People Factor. It was not because they weren't smart, not because they weren't capable or motivated. It was because they did not work well with the people around them. They didn't fit in. They didn't show the will or the temperament to become team players, to accept the daily give-and-take compromises in a culture where we prize the individual, but we celebrate the team.

As far as I can tell, there is no course or textbook devoted to this indispensable People Factor. So I'll proceed to give you a two-minute post-graduate course – just a few highlights on a subject that will largely determine your degree of success in any job you undertake.

To start with, let's admit that many of us know how to read words, but not enough of us know how to read people. And that can be more important. To learn about people, you have to learn, above all, how to listen. Just as you often must read between the lines, you have to listen between the words. Try to figure out the real message someone is telling you, even if it's something you don't want to hear.

No matter what your job description turns out to be, you have to relate not just to those above you, but to those below you and alongside you. A perceptive

executive once observed that you are often promoted not by your superiors, but by your subordinates. The mailroom, the secretaries, the office clerks spread the word about you very quickly.

Take your job seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously. Maybe it's difficult for you to accept, but the organization you join existed before you arrived and will probably be able to manage along without you after you leave.

Don't be afraid to compliment the people you work with now and then. In the office of a famous ear doctor, there's a poster that says "Nothing improves hearing like praise." In fact, sometimes the best way to get credit is to give it away.

And, remember, you can praise someone in public, but always criticize in private.

Never go around complaining about the dull task that has been assigned to you. Someone may point out to you – not too gently – that there's no such thing as a dull task, only a dull person.

On the other hand, there's a danger of being too eager – especially on your first job. I won't forget one new young employee at a client meeting. The client asked him, "What time is it?" And he answered, "What time would you like it to be, sir?"

Try to avoid the ailment called "tunnel vision." It means fixing your eyes straight ahead, seeing only your own specific duties, never turning your head to see how what you are doing impacts others, or how what they are doing could impact you. A wide-angle view can help you do your job better.

And for heaven's sake, don't be right all the time. Admit your mistakes – don't try to cover them up. Tell your boss the bad news as well as the good – he's going to find out any way.

This little post-graduate course ends with a quick self-quiz. Whenever you want to check your standing as a team player: just count how many times you use the pronoun "we," compared to the pronoun "I."

So, 49 years have flashed before my eyes in about 12 minutes. I cannot leave you this afternoon without again expressing my thanks for this special, very

personal honor. To deliver a Commencement Address at my Alma Mater, the University of Mississippi, is far beyond what I could have hoped for, more than I ever dared to dream, when I received my degree in Fulton Chapel so many years ago.

If I could be reincarnated at this moment, I wish that it would be at your age, in your chair, in the rows before me. Lacking that, my greatest wish is that each and every one of you will someday share the sense of satisfaction that I have known today in being with you.

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