WELCOME FRIENDS, FAMILY, COLLEAGUES, AND GRADUATES. We are gathered for this joyous occasion – a time when parents and family can be proud that their offspring made it to GRADUATION. PHEW. Parents can now relax, or so they think – or at least today. Then tomorrow – oh tomorrow – “OK so you majored in anthropology – now where are you going to get a job? I mean what is anthropology good for?” Take heart … George W. Bush took a single course in anthropology from Margaret Mead when she was teaching at Yale, and got an A (she gave everybody a straight A that semester) and he got to be president! OK, not everybody who takes a single course in anthropology can get to be president, but Amy Goodman took a bunch of courses – she was an anthropology major at Harvard – and she invented DEMOCRACY NOW, a critical news program that plays daily on KPFA, KPFB and over 300 stations across the country. And then there was John Schaeffer, our very own graduate. He plugged into the sun with Real Goods and became a millionaire! There are as many jobs for anthropologists as the anthropological imagination can think up.

Well, we have that taken care of. Now to honor this graduation. Traditionally graduation is not only a time for celebration – it’s a time for the older generation to say to the young: “Well we made a mess of the world, but we know the young can fix it.” I won’t do that. I see graduation as a time for contemplation – who are we, where did we come from, and where are we headed. The long duree.

The story goes something like this: Human beings are primates who have evolved. Their evolution is manifested in increasing brain size and increased intelligence and symbolic activity. (No wonder the creationists don’t believe in evolution!) The human ancestors who emerged flourished in Africa, Asia and Europe for more than a million years. Homo erectus was found and named – in body almost like modern man; as the name indicates he was erect, that is not walking on all fours. Evidence from a campsite on the French Mediterranean coast showed them as beachgoers, with stone and bone tools. Later on in the evolutionary story we find evidence of another presumably related creature who was named homo sapiens by Linnaeus – sapiens refers to a being with great wisdom and discernment, mainly an attribute of an expansion of brain size some 250 thousand years ago, plus or minus, and known to have spread worldwide. In evolutionary terms, homo sapiens was a life form with fantastic potential: from creatures with limited ability to modify their environment to homo sapiens who in a relatively short time had the capacity to change the environment, to communicate through language, to populate the globe. A story that I will not pursue in further detail here.

However apart from noticing the obvious self-adoration, I was curious as to why humans use the term sapiens to refer to themselves, and later sapiens sapiens, and whether the sapiens (intelligent) part was still evolving or not. So for a time I went about asking people, “When did homo sapiens peak?” Three answers will suffice here. The biological anthropologist and the ecologist said, “Just before agriculture was discovered” – some ten thousand years ago – because prior to agriculture, humans were ecologically in balance with the planet. With agriculture began the increasing over utilization of natural
resources, activity that now threatens the globe. A second answer came from a political
scientist who said, “Homo sapiens peaked with Mozart,” indicating for him that artistic
accomplishment was the most important measure. A third respondent said homo
sapiens had not yet peaked, indicating that homo sapiens was still evolving, becoming
smarter and more intelligent with the passage of time.

Several writers have addressed the issue of whether humans have been getting smarter
or whether we’ve been getting dumber. In *Ismael*, a prize-winning book by Daniel Quinn,
a young man in search of truth sees an ad in the local newspapers from a teacher
looking for serious students. He finds himself in an abandoned office with a full-grown
gorilla. “You are the teacher?” he asks incredulously. “I am the teacher,” the gorilla
replies – the tale is about Takkers and Leavers and how we are killing the Earth along
with ourselves. Another book is by a Nobel Laureate, Szent-Gyorgyi, a biologist who
discovered the powers of vitamin C. It’s called *The Crazy Ape*, a short book about a
strange animal: “In much of the world half the children go to bed hungry and we spend a
trillion on rubbish – steel, iron, tanks. We are all criminals.” He doubted man’s survival in
a world run by “idiots,” the NY Times headlines read (1970). “In order to survive, every
race must be adapted to the surrounding ..American society,” said the Hungarian born,
“is death oriented.” We need a new beginning, he argued: “Never has mankind gone
through a more turbulent period. . .with the ultimate biological absurdity of preparing to
wipe out life created by nature over billions of years.” Even earlier, in the 1930s, the
historian, archaeologist, philosopher RG Collingwood wrote a piece “Man Goes Mad.”
Critiquing the notion that men were getting wiser . . . for Collingwood the marks of
madness were scale and size of warfare and its instruments: a man who spends “every
penny that his safe contains making it burglar proof, is mad.” These are scientists with
the long view, commenting on the world they see around them with a long time
perspective.

Other lessons derive from the study of empires. While empires rise they also unravel,
deteriorate or collapse – the Mayan, the Inca, the British Empire. Jarrod Diamond’s book
*Collapse* is one recent book on this subject. In the same vein, a Native American
anthropologist – Jack Weatherford – wrote about the Mongol Empire in his recent NYT
bestseller, *Genghis Khan*. Weatherford examined the 13th century efforts of Mongol
leader Genghis Khan, who Chaucer praised “as excellent in all things.” At age 50, when
he had conquered every tribe on the Mongolian Steppe, he set out to confront the
armies of the civilized peoples who had harassed and enslaved nomadic tribes for
centuries. In 25 years the Mongol army subjugated more lands and people than the
Romans in 400 years. Genghis Khan, with his sons and grandsons, conquered the most
densely populated civilizations – the kingdoms of China, the central Asian lands of the
Turks, the Persians, across the mountains of Afghanistan to the Indus river with no more
than a hundred thousand warriors on horseback – from the China Seas to the Danube.
When Genghis Khan was born, the Old World consisted of a series of regional
civilizations . . . by the time of his death he had connected them with diplomatic contacts
that remain today. The disjointed Silk Route became one of history’s largest free-trade
zones. He created the first international postal system, international law, a regular
census – an empire that lasted another 150 years after his death. According to
Weatherford, the Mongols opened the world to new commerce in goods, ideas, and
knowledge, took bright German miners to China, Chinese doctors to Persia,
metalworkers from Paris to build a fountain on the Mongolian steppes, financed Christian
churches in China, Buddhist temples in Iran, Koranic schools in Russia, not only
conquered but unified China by being “more Chinese than the Chinese.” In every country
initial destruction was followed by expanded trade. The English scientist Roger Bacon said the Mongols succeeded not merely by military might but “by means of science.”

What any of us take from history is invariably selective. With deterioration of the empire the words changed in Europe – Voltaire remembered Genghis Khan as a barbarian, cruel and ugly, and the Mongols became the scapegoat for the plight of these Eastern countries, justification for European colonialism, barbarians, mental retard e.g. mongoloid … imbeciles. For the Taliban the American are equated with the Mongols, for Saddam Hussein similar comparisons were made as Americans moved to invade Iraq. People remember – for centuries.

Imagine Hulegu – the Mongol conqueror of Baghdad who encircled and occupied Baghdad January 1258. Baghdad, the Florence of the Middle East, for 500 years the heart of the Muslim world, a nodal point in the caravan routes between east and west, a center for medicine and innovative mathematical and astronomical ideas. The Mongols chopped down the date palms cultivated for centuries, turned the trunks into lethal weapons, used the power of gunpowder, planted explosives from a distance. Hulegu destroyed the dams, and diverted the Tigris. After 5 days the Caliph capitulated. Looting followed, the city was set afire; with the irrigation system destroyed the land became a steppe. The Mongols accomplished in 2 years what the European crusaders failed to do in 2 centuries. They had conquered the heart of the Arab world. But their collapse was to come and within decades they were expelled by indigenous rebellions. Sound familiar?

Today George W. Bush is seen by many in the East as the barbarian. There were no weapons of mass destruction and his appeal to the American and Iraqi people about wanting to liberate and bring democracy sounded like Napoleon’s speeches when Napoleon landed in Egypt in 1798, promising to liberate the Egyptians and to bring freedom and liberty. The same speech was given by the British Lt. Gen. Stanley Maude in 1917 in Baghdad.: “Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.” Mission Accomplished was a stunt that could only have succeeded because of lack of knowledge on the part of citizens and a lack of history – The Arrogance of Power, Senator William Fulbright called it. Others simply call it Western parochialism and propaganda.

Another Empire
I was not raised when the term American empire was commonplace. My children were raised when the US was fighting the good fight in the Cold War. My grandchildren, young as they are, already recognize the term American empire. It’s on the front burner now. Expansionist tendencies by the US are not new as we are increasingly reminded by military historians – in 1898 some 250 marines entered Hawaii and it was annexed – the bumper sticker says “Hawaii is our Tibet.” Before that there were takeovers in other locales from Cuba to Colombia, to Iran and the displacement of Mossadegh. As Afghans remember the Mongols so do Iranians remember the role of the US in destroying Iran’s first democratically elected president … Mossadegh … a time most American know nothing about as they listen to contemporary news broadcasts, so they don’t understand anger or backlash. Why do they hate us is asked in ignorance of the work of our CIA and clandestine missions.

Sir Edmund Leach, a distinguished British anthropologist, wrote a letter to his dad around 1929 trying to explain his lack of concentration in his studies at Cambridge and the tests he had flunked. When trying to explain he said, “Consider for a moment
civilization as it is today. On the one hand we have the vast and terrible tyranny that is typified by American business that is but the local succession to the more sober commerce of the last century, so vast and unmanageable has this huge monster become.. against this you have arrayed the deadly efficient machine that is arrived at by the Russian Soviets. In cruelty, there is little to choose between the machine world of the Soviet and the financial tyranny of western big business.”

In 1953 President Eisenhower made the connection, when in his farewell speech he said, “Beware of the military–industrial complex and its impact on American democracy.” With militarism comes secrecy and justification. At yesterday’s CIA hearings on General Hayden we heard such phrasings as, “There is no way to inform Americans without informing the enemy,” therefore not allowing the public scrutiny. The CIA is described as producing intelligence – but they do more: bribe, torture, assassinate, assist in overthrowing governments. As one pundit said, there is no terrorism problem in Africa, there is an AIDS epidemic. Yet we are supporting warlords in Somalia as a secular force against terrorists. Terror now equals Islam. We have marines in Iran, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld says, “to protect our troops in Iraq.” And to bring it closer to home President Bush has now invited Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and other companies to build a virtual fence on the US-Mexican border. Cancel NAFTA if you want to stem border crossings. Former Berkeley professor Chalmers Johnson, a CIA insider during the Vietnam war, sees the expanding empire and the services that support them as bankrupting the US and inviting retaliations – Blowback his book was called. Yet others write about democracy and free trade as if they were one and the same, and conflate patriotism with shopping – after all, President Bush told us to go shopping after 9/11.

If you take the long view one has to ask, where did this all come from? Some attribute the acceleration of Empire to the Reagan ethic – if you can get away with it do it – and it does not much matter what party you belong to. Lawlessness is rampant. And where are the American people in all this, never mind the Congress? Some are writing their congressmen, some are doing two days work in one, overall a balkanized population according to ethnic strips or sexual identity, many are ipodized or mesmerized by TV, others are suffering, or objecting in any way they can. Ipodizing doesn’t help.

How will the American Empire be viewed in 500 years – different or the same as the Mongols? Improvements in globalized trade might be acknowledged, increase in availability of consumer goods to the masses, the spread of democracy as a vision, universal schooling, technical breakthroughs – all good things. One thing that is different however, is the power and uses of contemporary technology such as nuclear, which is why Szent-Gyorgyi referred to homo sapiens as the crazy ape. History might record that the US not only did it to others (referring to Nagasaki and Hiroshima) but to their own people. Witness those still suffering nuclear legacies – cancer, birth abnormalities – from the Artic where waste is dumped, to one of the most contaminated places in the world at Hanford Washington (just ask Lesley Stahl), to the Mormon and other ranchers in Utah and Nevada, and the indigenous peoples of the southwest and extending throughout our semi possessions in the Pacific – the Marquesans in particular. Propaganda is made easier by Technology – and once spread prevarications stick. Most of our soldiers in Iraq think Saddam was behind the 9/11 attacks and that he had WMDs. Then there is Paul Bremer and his 100 edicts, laws that basically allow American companies to plunder in broad daylight Iraqi resources, and our pundits can only say, “Democracy is difficult to seed in Iraq.”
Taking the long view the question will be asked at the macro level – how is it that the richest, most powerful country, in spite of scientific know-how, did not sign the Kyoto Treaty and has done little to limit auto emissions? And once again we are threatening to use nuclear weapons. Global warming is real regardless of controversy over cause. And the shame of Katrina. At the micro level the compassionate rhetoric of the US might be viewed by comparison with other countries. My students inform me – out of 163 countries the US is one of 5 countries and one of 2 industrialized countries to offer no federally paid maternal leave. California has even started pushing the idea of pre-school for children as early as 3 years – an age where they are easily influenced – positioning children for consumerism. In 1959, the UN proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, listing one of the principles that the child have full opportunities for play and recreation. In 1989 there were enough signatories to make it international law. Only 2 countries have not yet ratified. Somalia and the US. Internally we debate whether school recess should continue to exist. Some argue recess is a waste of time better used for instruction. No recess, more ADHD perhaps. More pharmaceuticals? Gone are the days when children run through neighborhoods to play. The substitution of natural play with skills feeds the idea that individuals are only as valuable as the skills they have. Recess was completely cancelled in a Massachusetts school and elsewhere in order to maximize instruction time to prepare young people to compete in a global society. You get the picture. Homo sapiens is being fashioned as a machine.

And all of this long to short duree presentation is why I will not tell the graduates, “We’ve made a mess it is now up to you.” Instead we might heed the late John Kenneth Galbraith’s message, “We need a coalition of the concerned – young and old, American and others. Margaret Mead in her later years noted: “Capitalism, Communism and Socialism were invented in the 19th century to meet 19th century needs – we need a philosophy for our own times." She also said it only takes a few people to change things, and if you don’t believe that look at the dozen people in the Bush administration who have. A Tanzanian law professor put it this way recently: “We are on the threshold of reconstructing a new civilization, a more universal, a more humane civilization, ... we have to rediscover other civilizations and weave together a new tapestry borrowing from different cultures and peoples.”

Global warming can teach us that we’re all in this together. There is work to be done. Let’s begin first by recognizing our complicity, by using solutions we already have. We know how to solve the energy problem; poverty and hunger are distribution issues. We need leaders with character, integrity, honesty and courage and let’s start plugging that into our 1 out of 4 standardized tests. We can draw on the history of tolerance and peace and redistribute the federal budget from military to civilian needs if there is the will. “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves...”

So homo sapiens sapiens, let’s see if we’re up to it!

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