

### **Columbia Business School Graduation Remarks**

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Good evening, everyone.

Dean Hubbard, distinguished faculty, honored graduates, relieved parents, family, and friends – it's a distinct pleasure to be in New York City this evening to celebrate the biggest milestone to date in the lives of you -- the young men and women before us: your graduation from Columbia University Business School.

It may surprise you, graduates, but as big a night as this is for you, it's an even bigger night for your parents. They may look calm and collected as they sit in the audience, but, deep inside, they're doing cartwheels, dancing the Macarena, and practically speaking in tongues, they're so excited. This is what happens when parents anticipate that their bank accounts will soon re-hydrate after being bone dry for two years. So, for everyone here this evening, it's a very special occasion. And I'm delighted to share it with you.

I am keenly aware that graduates traditionally refer to our time together this evening, as the calm before the storm. Some graduates – perhaps those who minored in self-awareness – refer to the commencement address, as, 'the snooze before the booze'. However you describe my comments this evening, please know that I understand. It wasn't that long ago that I was in your place. And I remember the day well. I knew that I owed my parents – my financial benefactors – this opportunity to revel in our mutual accomplishment. Yet, as the guy at the podium droned on about values, goals, and how to make my dreams take flight, I remember desperately checking and rechecking my watch. I thought: *I deserve to party, and this codger's cramping my style!*

In one of life's true ironies, I am now that codger. Well ... I'm the female equivalent ... a codg-ette, I guess. And I now understand that values, goals, and how to make dreams take flight, really are important. So being a firm believer that hindsight is one of life's greatest teachers, allow me to make belated amends.

To that distinguished, erudite, and absolutely brilliant man whom I silently dissed many years ago: *mea culpa*. Big, BIG *mea culpa!*

This evening, graduates, I want to share a few thoughts about a topic that should be near and dear to your hearts: the world of global business. But, I'm going to present this topic in a way that you probably haven't considered before. I'm going to take a look at how The United States is often perceived in global business, what causes this perception, and what we can do about it. To help me, I'm going to make use of a model.

To begin, I'd like you to consider your hand. That's right ... your hand.

Other than the fact that mine desperately needs a manicure, it's a pretty typical hand. But, what I want you to notice, in particular, is that the five fingers are not the same. One is short and thick, one tiny, and the other three are different as well. And yet, as in perhaps no other part of our bodies, the fingers work in harmony without us even thinking about them individually. Whether we attempt to grasp a dime on a slick, marble surface, a child's arm as we cross the street, or a financial report, we don't consciously say, "OK, move these fingers here, raise this one, turn this one under, now clamp

together. Got it!" We just think about what we want to do and it happens. Our fingers – as different as they are – coexist to create a critically important whole.

This unique way of looking at my hand was just one result of hot, summer evenings in my childhood home in Madras, India. My mother, sister, and I would sit at our kitchen table and – for lack of a better phrase – think big thoughts. One of those thoughts was this difference in our fingers and how, despite their differences, they worked together to create a wonderful tool.

As I grew up and started to study geography, I remember being told that the five fingers can be thought of as the five major continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. Now, let me issue a profound apology to both Australia and Antarctica. I bear neither of these continents any ill will. It's just that we humans have only five fingers on each hand, so my analogy doesn't work with seven continents.

Clearly, the point of my story is more important than geographical accuracy!

First, let's consider our little finger. Think of this finger as Africa. Africa is the little finger not because of Africa's size, but because of its place on the world's stage. From an economic standpoint, Africa has yet to catch up with her sister continents. And yet, when our little finger hurts, it affects the whole hand.

Our thumb is Asia: strong, powerful, and ready to assert herself as a major player on the world's economic stage.

Our index, or pointer finger, is Europe. Europe is the cradle of democracy and pointed the way for western civilization and the laws we use in conducting global business.

The ring finger is South America, including Latin America. Is this appropriate, or what? The ring finger symbolizes love and commitment to another person. Both Latin and South America are hot, passionate, and filled with the sensuous beats of the mambo, samba, and tango: three dances that – if done right – can almost guarantee you and your partner will be buying furniture together.

This analogy of the five fingers as the five major continents leaves the long, middle finger for North America, and, in particular, The United States. As the longest of the fingers, it really stands out. The middle finger anchors every function that the hand performs and is the key to all of the fingers working together efficiently and effectively. This is a really good thing, and has given the U.S. a leg-up in global business since the end of World War I.

However, if used inappropriately – just like the U.S. itself – the middle finger can convey a negative message and get us in trouble. You know what I'm talking about. In fact, I suspect you're hoping that I'll demonstrate what I mean. And trust me, I'm not looking for volunteers to model.

Discretion being the better part of valor ... I think I'll pass.

What is most crucial to my analogy of the five fingers as the five major continents, is that each of us in the U.S. – the long middle finger – must be careful that when we extend our arm in either a business or political sense, we take pains to assure we are giving a hand ... not the finger. Sometimes this is very difficult. Because the U.S. – the middle finger – sticks out so much, we can send the wrong message unintentionally.

Unfortunately, I think this is how the rest of the world looks at the U.S. right now. Not as part of the hand – giving strength and purpose to the rest of the fingers – but, instead, scratching our nose and sending a far different signal.

I'd challenge each of you to think about how critically important it is for every finger on your hand to rise and bend together. You cannot simply "allow" the other four fingers to rise only when you want them to. If you've ever even tried to do that, you know how clumsy and uncoordinated it is.

My point here is that it's not enough just to understand that the other fingers co-exist. We've got to consciously and actively ensure that every one of them stands tall together, or that they bend together when needed.

Today, as each of you ends one chapter in your young lives and begins another, I want you to consider how you will conduct your business careers so that the other continents see you extending a hand ... not the finger. Graduates ... it's not that hard. You can change and shape the attitudes and opinions of the other fingers – the other continents and their peoples – by simply ascribing positive intent to all your international business transactions. If you fail, or if you are careless, here's a perfect example of what can happen:

A U.S. businesswoman was recently in Beijing, China, on an international training assignment for a luxury hotel chain. The chain was rebranding an older Beijing hotel. As such, the toilets in the hotel had yet to be upgraded. There were no porcelain commodes, just holes in the floor. Until recently, this was the standard procedure in China.

Now, eight-thousand-miles removed from the scene, you and I – and most Americans – can shake our heads and giggle at the physical contortions and delicate motor skills necessary to make the best of this situation. We're simply not used to it. But to loudly and insultingly verbalize these feelings on site – in front of the employees and guests of the host country is bush league. And, yet, that's exactly what this woman observed.

In the hotel's bar, the woman overheard a group of five American businessmen loudly making fun of the hotel's lavatory facilities. As the drinks flowed, the crass and vulgar comments grew louder, and actually took on an angry, jingoistic tone. While these Americans couldn't speak a word of Chinese, their Chinese hosts spoke English very well ... and understood every word the men were saying.

And we wonder why the world views many Americans as boorish and culturally insensitive. This incident should make it abundantly clear. These men were not giving China a hand. They were giving China the finger. This finger was red, white and blue and had "the United States" stamped all over it.

Graduates, it pains me greatly that this view of America persists. Although I'm a daughter of India, I'm an American businesswoman. My family and I are citizens of this great country.

This land we call home is a most-loving, and ever-giving nation – a "promised land" that we love dearly in return. And it represents a true force that – if used for good -- can steady the hand – along with global economies and cultures.

Yet, to see us frequently stub our fingers on the international business and political stage is deeply troubling. Truth be told, the behaviors of a few sully the perception for all of us. And we know how often perception is mistaken for reality.

We can do better. We should do better. With your help, with your empathy, with your positive intent as representatives of the U.S. in global business, we will do better. Now, as never before, it's important that we give the world a hand ... not the finger.

In conclusion, graduates I want to return to my introductory comments this evening. I observed that as big a night as this is for you, it's an even bigger night for your parents. I ascribed their happiness to looking forward to a few more "George Washingtons" in their bank accounts. While this is certainly true, there is another reason.

Each of your parents believes that their hard work has paid off. Finally! They believe that maybe – just maybe – they have raised and nurtured the next Jack Welch, Meg Whitman, or Patricia Russo.

Don't disappoint them. Don't disappoint your companies. And don't disappoint yourselves.

As you begin your business careers, and as you travel throughout the world to assure America's continued global economic leadership, remember your hand -- and remember to do your part to influence perception.

Remember that the middle finger – The United States – always stands out. If you're smart, if you exhibit emotional intelligence as well as academic intelligence – if you ascribe positive intent to all your actions on the international business stage – this can be a great advantage. But, if you aren't careful –if you stomp around in a tone-deaf fog like the ignoramus in Beijing -- it will also get you in trouble. And when it does, you will have only yourself to blame.

Graduates, as you aggressively compete on the international business stage, understand that the five major continents and their peoples – the five fingers of your hand – each have their own strengths and their own contributions to make. Just as each of your fingers must coexist to create a critically important tool, each of the five major continents must also coexist to create a world in balance. You, as an American businessperson, will either contribute to or take away from, this balance.

So, remember, when you extend your arm to colleagues and peoples from other countries, make sure that you're giving a hand ... not the finger. You will help your country, your company, and yourself, more than you will ever know.

Thank you very much.