



What's at Stake: Our Choices in the 2016 Presidential Election

*Remarks for Cap & Gown Convocation
September 24, 2016*

**President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University**

1992 – 1996 – 2000 – 2004 – 2008 – 2012 – 2016

This is the seventh time I've given remarks at Cap & Gown Convocation before a U.S. presidential election. Each time the impending election felt, somehow, momentous, the issues of great importance, the historical moment unparalleled in human history. Whether the issues were the Gulf War in the early 1990's, economic expansion in the mid-1990's, growing cultural and political dissonance toward the end of the 20th century, the bloody aftermath of September 11 that mired the country in years of war, the great recession, the election of the nation's first African American president with the progressive theme of hope and change, each election moment had its own twists and turns and visions for ultimate success and "day-after" regrets for losers and winners alike.

But there's something remarkably different about this year.

This year the stakes seem higher than ever --- higher than the first time I voted in 1972 when I was just 19 years old, the Vietnam war was raging, protests were tearing the nation apart, and George [McGovern](#) seemed like the hopeful, ethical antidote to the old, corrupt Richard Nixon. But [Nixon](#) won in a landslide --- and two years later he resigned the presidency as a result of the [Watergate](#) scandal. People knew a lot of bad things about Nixon in 1972 but they voted for him anyway because he seemed to offer security and stability, but that was an illusion.

There's something remarkably different about this year, even more treacherous than 1972.

I remember standing on the national mall in 1981, months after President [Carter](#) lost his bid for re-election at a time when Iranian militants had been holding 52 Americans [hostage](#) for 444 days. As I watched the inauguration of Ronald [Reagan](#) at the same moment as the hostages in Iran were released through the [Algiers Accords](#), I reflected on the fact that no matter our individual politics, the peaceful transfer of power from one party to another was a beautiful thing to watch. Nixon was long gone, Gerald [Ford's](#) was a short-lived interim presidency, Jimmy Carter won in '76 but then lost in the bitter realities of recession, political rebellion in his own party and the

threat of a world growing ever more dangerous with the Iran hostage crisis. In the 1980's President Reagan won landslides in both of his elections, a pendulum swing toward more conservative domestic policies and more hawkish defense, but at great economic cost. After Reagan, the first President Bush ([George H.W. Bush](#)) inherited a recession and rising middle class concerns, and then the young Bill [Clinton](#) brought a wave of change and new generation excitement, sweeping the 1992 election handily.

But there's something remarkably different about this year, and it's very worrisome.

The republic survived the election in the Year 2000 when [Al Gore](#) won the popular vote but a decision of the [Supreme Court](#) gave [George W. Bush](#) Florida's electoral votes and the presidency. None of us could have possibly anticipated September 11, 2001 and the years of war and terrorism from that day forward. Millions of Americans cheered on the Mall in 2009 when Barack [Obama](#) took the oath of office, a day that truly felt like the first day of the new millennium, perhaps a decade late but better late than never.

But there's something remarkably different about this year, and we cannot ignore the dangers.

This is the first time in history that a [woman](#) has secured the nomination of a major political party, and in any other normal historical time, that fact would be cause for some celebration. But this is not a normal presidential election, and the possibility that a woman might become president of the United States is just an interesting footnote, perhaps as it should be. The threats to freedom, peace and justice both at home and abroad make all other considerations pale in comparison. The danger that this nation might voluntarily elect repression in order to find some kind of desperate comfort in the embrace of [Leviathan](#) is an overriding concern.

Who you choose to vote for is your business, of course. I cannot tell you who to vote for, but I would be remiss in my duty if I did not make clear the choices and consequences we face. As educated people, women and men who will be leaders of families and communities far into the future, you must know what is at stake this year, you must know how this moment is so different from all elections in memory, you must bring your powerful intellectual discernment and critical thinking ability to bear on what's happening to our country. You must vote!

You can vote for the candidate of your choice, but you must know the choices before us. The choices are not really about one person, one candidate or the other, one political party or the other, but rather, these are choices about how we choose to live together as a society. We are a diverse community of people of many different races and ethnicities and languages and beliefs and political viewpoints, a people who must somehow figure out how to live together in peace and prosperity in spite of our differences.

These are the choices we are making when we cast our ballots on November 8.

We will choose between two very different views of our society. One choice welcomes all people of all races and beliefs, all languages and nationalities, all abilities and heritages, and celebrates that diversity while striving to become one nation in peace and freedom. The opposite choice says that such an inclusive view is merely "political correctness," that this nation belongs

to only some people, that our society should reject the refugee, the immigrant, the Muslim, the person who is different from, frankly, the white majority. That point of view seems agnostic about the fact that by the year 2050 the majority will no longer be white; that point of view seems to think it can hold back the tide of sociology. History will prove that perspective to be terribly wrong, but at what price will that point of view persist in its aggressive resistance through the years of demographic and social change to come?

We will choose between those who want to build walls to keep others out, and those who realize that walls invariably diminish the freedom of the people who live behind them.

We will choose between those who are so ignorant of their own immigrant history that they fail to realize that they are here thanks to the courage of immigrants who made treacherous border crossings for generations from all points on the globe --- some involuntarily and in chains --- or we will choose those who know that this nation's moral and spiritual power comes from respect for our heritage as a nation composed of many nations, many peoples, many traditions that have come together to build the most advanced civilization in human history.

One choice says, and this is a quote from a current candidate: "American hands will rebuild our nation. Not the hands of people from other nations." That speaker's grandfather was an immigrant who built businesses here, making the candidate's own wealth and success possible two generations later. My own immigrant grandfathers, Irish and Italians, helped to build American railroads and other large civic projects that used cheap immigrant labor in the early 20th century. Who among us did not have ancestors from other nations and relatives even this day who came here and helped to build this nation? Some of those ancestors came by force on slave ships, through the American original sin of slavery. Whose "American hands" are we talking about? Whose America is the choice before us this year.

We will choose between a view that says we must sacrifice the freedom of some people for the sake of security, or a view that realizes that all liberties begin to wither when we start selectively repressing rights through profiling, through targeting people based on their religion or nationality or skin color or language or sexual orientation or other personal characteristics. The rights and freedoms that millions of Americans fought for across the centuries are not just for some, but for all, without discrimination, fear or favor.

Today as the nation inaugurates the new [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) (@NMAAHC #APeoplesJourney) on the Mall, we are particularly conscious of the racial dynamics at work in the current campaign, the cynical way in which one of the candidates has used racial stereotypes and racist claims about President Obama's citizenship to curry favor with some voters. We have experienced a resurgence nationally of racism, of brutal police tactics including the increasingly frequent police shootings of unarmed black men, the rise of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement and virulent opposition to that movement, reaction to police violence in the form of riots and reprehensible vigilante shooters targeting police. Charlotte is burning, Tulsa is mourning, joining Ferguson and Baltimore and too many other cities. Racial violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers and tolerated by politicians is a central issue in this campaign. Our choice is stark: we can choose to move away from the brink of the cataclysm to a more peaceful resolution of this crisis; or we will choose to walk straight into the

inferno. We will either stand up for racial justice, or we will fall down on the promise of America as a nation committed to equal justice and freedom for all.

We will choose between peace as the essential condition for human life to flourish, or war as the ongoing chronic dystopia for generations to come. We will choose between those who understand that peace requires equal measures of strong diplomacy and strong defense at the ready, employed smartly and in alliance with other nations who share our values as conditions require; or those who believe that we can win against any threat by “bombing the hell out of them.” Terrorism is a new form of asymmetrical warfare that cannot be eradicated by the old military strategies; we need new and more sophisticated approaches to eradicate terrorism.

We will choose between those who willfully turn their backs on science in denial of climate change, and those who understand that if we don’t act immediately the future of this planet is in grave peril not through war or terrorism but through careless and selfish consumption of fossil fuels that have harmed the atmosphere perhaps permanently.

We will choose between a political disposition that expresses no care or concern for the poor, that glorifies its own wealth while exploiting fears among under-educated and socially marginalized peoples without creating any real proposals to address policy; or, on the other hand we will choose a political disposition that has long roots in social justice, the eradication of poverty and the improvement of educational opportunities for all.

We will choose between a mob psychology that elevates a demagogue while hurtling the most vicious and unprintable epithets at the opposition, that whips up the anger and hatred of the masses as a political weapon to gain power; or we will choose a more enlightened, educated pathway to political power, one that is based in knowledge and research, in legitimate debate and healthy compromise to achieve the best ends for all people. We will choose between a movement that exalts ignorance or one that knows that democracy depends upon well-educated citizens to make the best choices for self-governance.

We will choose between a view that elevates and celebrates women’s leadership ability with respect and pride, or a view that represses women’s potential and disparages powerful women as somehow emotionally deficient. In this week of the opening of the African American History Museum, we have also been reading the new book [“Hidden Figures”](#) about the African American women mathematicians at NASA who made it possible for astronauts like John Glenn and Neil Armstrong to become American heroes. We’ve long known the names of those white men, but we are just now learning the stories of the black women whose intellectual firepower created the algorithms for those space flights. We will choose between a world that represses women’s history and black history, or a world that shines a bright light on our power to lead the change we must achieve for the good society to thrive.

Surely, as well-educated Trinity seniors, you have learned that history is replete with examples of demagogues who seized control of nations through exploiting fear and ignorance. Surely you also know that ours is the oldest surviving democracy on the face of the earth because we have worked hard as a people to recognize and resolve our differences peacefully, that we have resisted the demagogue and elevated rational leaders, that we are not mindless followers but

active participants in the ongoing American experiment called democracy which requires the best of our knowledge and skills and values and commitments to each other every single day.

We cannot, must not, will not elect a Leviathan, someone who promises all will be well if we only trust the king. That's not our form of government. A healthy skepticism wrapped around our innate desire to participate in our own self-governance is what makes democracy work at the local, state and national levels.

We face a choice between a dyspeptic view of American society that seeks power by telling us how bad everything is, or a hopeful, moral view that realizes our relative privilege in a world where most people have not even one small iota of the success and privileges we enjoy each day.

In 1904, the year the first class of Trinity women wore their caps and gowns to graduation, America elected one of the greatest presidents ever, [Theodore Roosevelt](#). He took office at a time of rising immigration, extreme concentration of wealth, significant technological change, concern for the environment, and global challenges. In his 1905 inaugural address, Roosevelt said this, in words that seem to fit today's moment as well:

“Much has been given us, and much will rightfully be expected from us. We have duties to others and duties to ourselves; and we can shirk neither. ...Modern life is both complex and intense, and the tremendous changes wrought by the extraordinary industrial development of the last half century are felt in every fiber of our social and political being. Never before have men tried so vast and formidable an experiment as that of administering the affairs of a continent under the forms of a Democratic republic... Upon the success of our experiment much depends, not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind. If we fail, the cause of free self-government throughout the world will rock to its foundations, and therefore our responsibility is heavy, to ourselves, to the world as it is to-day, and to the generations yet unborn.” ([Roosevelt Inaugural Address 1905](#))

My friends, faculty, families, students soon to graduates of Trinity: we cannot fail, we must not fail! The heritage we share across Trinity generations demands that we exercise the best of our knowledge and values to stand up in the public square and participate as citizen leaders to ensure a future for our communities rooted in justice and leading toward peace. By putting on these caps and gowns tonight you have joined in solidarity with the decades of Trinity leaders who have taken up this great responsibility before you. There are no by-standers to history among Trinity Women and Men. We are called to be positive, affirmative actors to shape the world as it must be to endure for generations yet to come. We will all make a choice soon that will truly affect our posterity. Whatever choice you make, do it with full knowledge of the opportunities and consequences. And whatever you do, make the choice. Your most important duty as an educated citizen is to VOTE.

May you go forth from the convocation wrapped in the powerful mantles of knowledge, blessed by the Trinity whose power, wisdom and love are your constant companions across all of the days of our lives. Congratulations, seniors!