

BY GEORGE TAKEI

ENGAGING THE FUTURE

Cal State Los Angeles Commencement Address

Friday, June 10, 2016

It is a privilege to be with you this afternoon on the occasion of your commencement ceremony from Cal State Los Angeles with your family and friends assembled here beaming with pride for you, and for me, to receive this honorary doctorate.

This is a momentous event for all of us. Certainly it is an afternoon of celebration. We all celebrate your achievements at this fine university as you begin the next chapter of your life. And for me, this is an afternoon of gratitude for this extraordinary distinction and personal reflection.

To receive this recognition, this honorary doctorate from Cal State L.A., located right here in this vibrant community of East Los Angeles, is particularly meaningful for me.

You see, I was born not too far from here on Boyle Avenue just over the hill. *Si! Naci en el barrio Mexicano de Los Angeles, East L.A. Me encanta la cultura Mexicana America. Y amo la comida Mexicana.*

I grew up here in East L.A. with friends with nicknames like Pelon, Lata and Chichi. My mother learned to cook Mexican from our neighbor, Mrs. Gonzales. Thanks to her, Mrs. Takei, my mother, made the best enchiladas and tacos in all of East L.A.

But when Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan, our lives changed cataclysmically. Our family, together with 120,000 other Japanese Americans, were forced out of our homes by the U.S. government and imprisoned in barbed

wire prison camps simply because we looked like the people that bombed Pearl Harbor.

I still remember the barbed-wire fence that confined us. I can never forget the tall sentry towers with the machine guns pointed down at us. I remember the searchlight that followed me when I made the midnight runs from our barrack to the latrine. For my parents, it was an invasive, degrading and humiliating light. But to five-year-old me, I thought it was nice that they lit the way for me to pee.

Children are amazingly adaptable. I adapted to a grotesquely abnormal American childhood.

At the end of the war, the gates of the prison camps were thrown wide open. We were free to go. We came back home to East L.A. This time, we lived on North Soto Street, also not too far from here. I'm an East L.A. "homie."

From here I went on to make a career as an actor in Hollywood making movies and television shows and a series called "Star Trek." And last year, at age 78, I made my Broadway debut in the musical "Allegiance" in New York City.

But throughout my acting career, because of my childhood imprisonment, an unjust incarceration, I have always been mindful of the preciousness of my rights as an American as well as my responsibilities as a citizen.

As President Abraham Lincoln famously said, our nation is "a government of the people, by the people and for the people." Ours is a people's government. The people have the capacity to do great things, as President Lincoln did when he led the nation into a bloody civil war and freed the slaves, making America a more moral nation. Americans have done great things.

But the problem with a people's government is that we are also fallible human beings.

We make mistakes — we have made horrible mistakes — like holding other human beings as slaves or imprisoning innocent people like my family and me in barbed-wire prison camps simply because of our ancestry. Human fallibility is imbedded in a people's democracy together with our capacity to do great deeds.

A people's democracy requires citizens who cherish the high ideals of our democracy and actively engage in the process. But that process can sometimes be testing.

Today, we are in the midst of a messy presidential election. It is an unusually stormy election season.

We may not all believe that immigrants from south of our border are all criminals, but there are many who do. Quite to the contrary, we believe that immigrants energize and contribute to the vitality of a society.

We may not think all Muslims are terrorists, but astonishingly, a number of us do. We believe that the millions of Muslims in the world are good, decent people and, indeed we know that Muslim Americans have fought for this country and died for this country.

All this turmoil is an extreme display of a "people's democracy" in action. If our elections are messy, it is because we are messy people. We have the capacity to be the whole range of what it means to be human — from shiningly noble to despicably



Photos by MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimo

George Takei delivers the keynote address at Cal State L.A.'s 69th Commencement ceremony. He also received an honorary doctorate degree.

rotten. This election reflects us. It is our mirror. We are a diverse and complex nation of very opinionated people.

It is our duty then and responsibility as citizens of a people's democracy to rise to the best ideals of our heritage as Americans. Our nation, a people's democracy, was established on the glowing principles set forth by our Founding Fathers — that all men are created equal, endowed with an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The central pillar of our justice system requires due process. Detention requires a charge that could be challenged in a court of law.

The Founding Fathers were great men. But they were also human — they too were fallible human beings. When they stated "all men are created equal," they literally meant all men. Women had no rights. They couldn't vote, they couldn't own property, they didn't even have rights over their own children.

Yet because determined women and fair-minded men challenged and debated and marched for equal rights for women, that today we have three women as justices on the Supreme Court of the U.S. and a woman has emerged as a very real potential president of the U.S.

The great men who founded this nation also kept other human beings as slaves. But because those slaves hungered for freedom and justice and struggled for it, and because their children and their grandchildren and the generations that followed maintain the struggle, through the Jim Crow years and the years of the civil rights movement, that now the descendants of slaves are in the halls of Congress as lawmakers and now an African American is serving as the president of the U.S.

We have an inspiring heritage as Americans. As you now enter the next chapter of your life energized to build your careers, you are also at a momentous time in American history. You are participants in a people's democracy. I hope you are enflamed about your role in shaping our government for a new century.

We, your generation and mine, have a challenge to boldly go where we have never gone before. Let us learn from the lessons of history, and, as the Founding Fathers did, shape a new nation to fit the ever advancing, constantly innovating, dynamic challenges of the 21st century.

Let us boldly go where we have never gone before.