



DR ALVAREZ DE TOLEDO

Ladies and gentlemen,
Distinguished Headmaster Powell and Mrs. Powell,
Respected Runnymede College staff,
And, most importantly, dear students,

I've delivered quite a few speeches in my life. That's what politicians do. Well, it's not the only thing we do. We debate. We argue. We fight like cats and dogs. And sometimes —believe it or not— we work to make people's lives better. We stand up for freedom. We pursue justice. We promote progress. We ensure peace. So yes, I've given many speeches in my life. And yet today is different. Different and special.

Today I stand before the brightest students from Spain's finest school, among them, my beloved daughter Cayetana. Young men and women with the potential to become the world's next mega-influencers. Parents: don't panic. I mean influencers in the deepest and most demanding sense of the word: beautiful minds exerting a truly beneficial and lasting influence on society.

Addressing you is an honor and a joy. The biggest prize this morning is for me. Thank you.

Dear students,

Allow me to begin by emphasizing a fundamental truth: your destiny is in your hands. It's not dictated by politicians, regardless of their ideologies, right or left, centrist or extremist. It's not shaped by the government, no matter how powerful or extensive its reach: don't expect the state, not even a nanny state, to hand you success; it won't.

In fact, your future is not even defined by your parents. Yes, mums and dads play a vital role in nurturing and supporting you, whether they hover like helicopters or push like tigers. But there comes a time, and it will be soon, when you must step out from under their wing. Their dreams for you, while relevant, and loving, and obviously well-meaning, are not your own. You must forge a path aligned with your personal aspirations, even if that means diverging from their expectations — or indeed from those of your group: your peers, your friends, your clique. Your social network acts like a nest, provides protection and a warm sense of belonging. But it doesn't dictate your potential. As I just said, your destiny is in your hands. And this means taking ownership of your actions, your decisions and your future.

I can imagine what some of you might be thinking: «But I don't know what I want to be or do in life! My future is out of focus!» Ha. Like the character Mel in Woody Allen's Deconstructing Harry. Great film.

Don't worry.



I never dreamed I would become a politician —let alone a Spanish one. An Argentinian mother, a French father, an English upbringing... I wanted to be Indiana Jones, exploring secret tombs littered with snakes in search of treasures lost centuries ago.

My mother is here today, and she can attest to this: at the age of five or six, I spent hours sprawled on the floor of the British Museum, meticulously copying hieroglyphs from the linen wrappings of Egyptian mummies. My passion for archaeology matured into a fascination with history, which evolved into a love for journalism, ultimately culminating in one of the most resilient political vocations south of the Pyrenees, immune to an infinite number of setbacks, failures, and disappointments.

Connecting the dots backwards, as Steve Jobs famously suggested in his Stanford Commencement speech, a kind observer could conclude: "Hey, Cayetana: from exploring the past to reporting on the present to charting the future. It all makes sense!"

I wish...

All I know is two things. First, that my life is essentially my own creation, shaped by my decisions, both good and bad, whether biologically predetermined or not. (This goes for the neuroscientist David Sapolsky, who has just published a mind-boggling book debunking free will.) And second, that in the lives of the people I most admire, three values stand out: truth, merit, and courage.

It's on these values that I'd like to reflect today.

First, truth.

I was lucky to study Modern History at Oxford, with its dreamy spires, its secluded cloisters, and its gorgeous Brandy Alexanders. My supervisor and mentor was Sir John H. Elliott, one of the greatest hispanists of the twentieth century, and perhaps of all time. He was an imposing figure: tall, thin, stern, and intellectually demanding. He taught me to cherish facts and revere clarity.

When I told Sir John I was abandoning the uplifting tranquility of a Seventeenth-Century archive for the boisterous chaos of a newsroom in Madrid, he shook his head in disappointment. When a few years later I told him I was leaving El Mundo to join a political party, he almost fainted. "Cayetana," he exclaimed, "you're heading downhill without brakes!"

Sir John: an empiricist, a rationalist, a fact-seeker, a champion of truth... He would have been appalled to see me now: wading through a post-truth swamp in my Louboutins.

Indeed, dear students, one of the greatest challenges your generation faces is learning to discern truth from falsehood, fact from fiction. You must approach this task with unwavering determination.

The truth exists and its pursuit is paramount. Paramount for acquiring knowledge, which is the supreme source of power and pleasure. And paramount for ensuring peaceful coexistence in a full democracy. By full, I mean full. Not a pseudo-democracy, a fake-democracy, with a rule of law of "quinta y pon". Not the kind of democracy contemporary populists here and everywhere adore.

Populism thrives on the destruction of facts and the exploitation of feelings. Populism turns life into a colossal showdown between "us" and "them". A Madrid-Barça match on a brutal scale, and to



the bitter end. Emotions cloud judgment, fuel tribalism, and provoke conflict, serious conflict. As educated individuals —privileged, intelligent, and educated individuals— it will soon be your duty to stand up for democracy and ensure social peace. It is a monumental undertaking.

I know what you're thinking: "Facts are dull; feelings slay."

Hmm... Think again.

Truth is empowering. Imagine possessing the ability to see through the maze and haze of misinformation and manipulation. Imagine making decisions based on hard-rock evidence nobody can question. These skills are invaluable and exhilarating. By critically evaluating information, you become the master of your own perspective, unshakeable in the face of sensationalism, a beacon of insight and integrity.

Please heed my advice. I'm a politician who hates seeing adults treated like children and who thinks children should be treated like adults. Remain curious. Think critically. Read, question, probe, read further, cross-check, and verify all the information that comes your way. Don't accept ideas solely because they're widely held or seductively presented. Seek the truth with diligence, even with passion. And if the facts change, do as Tony Judt: change your views accordingly. And one more thing: avoid relying on social media for understanding events or the world around you. Yes, TikTok is fun. And yes, Instagram caters to your vanity as it does to mine. Ten likes, a hundred likes, ten thousand likes... It's easy to be tweet-addicted. But social media overwhelms you with information that's either useless, superficial, or downright false. And that is disempowering.

So, remember: keep your emotions in check. Sharpen your reasoning faculties. Polish your skepticism. Honor the facts. Ensure words accurately convey the speaker's intention. Read Orwell all over again. Never stop seeking the truth. Be like Indiana Jones on his quest for the lost ark of the Covenant: good-humored and relentless.

And now, on to our second element: merit.

As a journalist, I had the privilege of interviewing remarkable leaders and intellectuals, among them Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Her life story reads like a novel.

Ayaan was born in Somalia and endured female genital mutilation at five. She later fled to the Netherlands to escape a forced marriage, where she became an elected member of Parliament and a staunch defender of Muslim women's rights. After criticizing radical Islam in a film, her colleague Theo van Gogh was murdered, and she was forced into hiding, like Salman Rushdie. Ayaan is a brave and beautiful woman, adamantly opposed to all forms of identity politics. "Look at me," she said to me during a long conversation by Zoom. "From an identity standpoint, I'm a compendium of minorities: woman, black, Muslim, now a heretic... But no. I'm much more than all of that. I'm an individual. And most importantly, I'm not a victim. I have freedom and responsibility."

Just like each and every one of you.

Dear students,

None of you are receiving a prize today on account of any identity marker or arbitrary circumstance. You will be rewarded —and acclaimed and applauded— for your brilliant



achievements and individual efforts. This is exactly how it should be. Excellence has no class, sex, gender, race or religion.

The shift from evaluating individuals based on demographics to focusing solely on merit marked a significant milestone in the history of civilization. It dismantled the entrenched systems of discrimination that had plagued societies for centuries. It made Martin Luther King's vision a reality: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

"By the content of their character...". Six key words, as relevant today as when first spoken. Meritocracy not only promotes true fairness and equality. It also lays the foundation for a freer and stronger society. In contrast, identity politics fosters division and discrimination, undermining progress. Even worse, it ultimately harms those it theoretically aims to defend.

Identity politics fosters a victim mentality, which is a modern form of servitude. Viewing yourself as a victim shackles your potential and stifles your growth. It undermines your accountability, resilience, and sense of responsibility, deepening your helplessness and dependence on others. When you adopt a victim mindset, you surrender your destiny to external factors, believing that your future is dictated by circumstances beyond your control. But it's not. Remember: you are the master of your destiny.

Indeed, adopting a victim mindset means subjecting yourself to an inverse form of humiliation. I once stated it an interview, to a certain scandal: "I wish to be judged by what I have between my ears, not by what I have between my legs." Moreover, just as I would never allow a man to speak on my behalf on account of his sex, I would never allow a woman to do so on account of hers. I have my own voice, and I encourage each of you to find and defend yours.

Let us continue to promote a culture where knowledge, excellence, integrity, and genuine accomplishment are the true measures of success. Let us resist the divisive forces of identity politics and uphold the values of merit, equality, and opportunity for all. Today, let us celebrate each of you not for who you are, but for what you have achieved.

Finally, the third element without which no good life can be led: courage.

Eighty years and a day ago —on June 6, 1944, a few minutes past 5 o'clock in the morning— a young boy with wavy blond hair and sea-blue eyes broke the news of the Normandy Landings through the microphones of La Voix de L'Amérique, a French radio station based in New York. He was just 18, and shortly thereafter, alongside 6,000 French and American soldiers, he bravely set sail for Europe aboard a warship called 'The General Gordon'. Their daunting mission: to liberate Europe and the world from the grip of Nazism, laying the groundwork for the liberal order you are now entrusted to uphold.

He was my father, and the legacy of his generation shines like a beacon.

Dear students,

It takes courage to defend freedom and democracy. And it takes courage to be true to yourself, to challenge the status quo, and to push against the currents of conformity, mediocrity, and fear. Courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. It's the determination to pursue what is right, even when it's difficult, and to defend your principles, even when it's unpopular.



Cancel culture has become pervasive on both sides of the Atlantic. People are quick to call out and ostracize anyone who deviates from prevailing orthodoxy. Authors are targeted: Rudyard Kipling, J.K. Rowling, Roald Dahl, Dr. Seuss... Statues are torn down: Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, David Hume... Even Churchill has been branded a racist. Churchill: the leader who played a pivotal role in defeating the most racist regime in history.

As students nearing university, you are the torchbearers of intellectual freedom. Defend the right to free speech and the free exchange of ideas. The Enlightenment was built on the principle of tolerance, including the freedom to offend and be offended. This does not mean endorsing hurtful actions; it means understanding that the exchange of ideas, even contentious ones, is vital for progress. It is through rational debate and discussion —based on facts!— that we grow intellectually and morally.

Dear students, dear Runnymedians,

Never let your voice be silenced.

Never compromise on the defence of freedom.

Never relinquish your right to independent thought. Cultivate it every day, unremittingly.

Be like the salmon. Yes, like the salmon. The salmon has a remarkable trait, which makes it unique: it swims upstream, against the current.

Follow suit. Dare to challenge the status quo. Defy group-thinking, mediocrity, and complacency.

Embrace intellectual curiosity. Forge your own path, even when it means going against the tide.

With truth as your guide, merit as your strength, and courage as your shield, no current is too strong and no barrier too great.

Swim on. Swim on.

At the river's head, where the waters are still and clear, your dedication and perseverance will be honored. The true fruits of your labor will be revealed, and you will find the rewards you deserve. Success, recognition, and the highest prize of all: respect.

Just as you do today.

Congratulations to each and every one of you.