

Michael Cohen

Speech to Recognition Ceremony

May 21, 2010

Provost Marshall, members of the faculty, graduates, parents, and friends. Today is a day of accomplishment, of promise achieved, and of new commitments to be realized. The GPIA is very proud of this year's graduating class. In January 2010 we had 45 graduates and now 85 in May 2010, totaling 130 for this academic year. The graduates come from 25 countries: Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Germany, Great Britain, India, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Graduates, this evening you are about to join more than 500 GPIA graduates from prior years. They are working in many places, from managing a refugee camp in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, to working on water projects in Darfur, to HIV programs in Africa, to earthquake reconstruction in Haiti and Chile, to covering the news in Damascus, to working with Liberian refugees in Staten Island, to the Red Cross in Washington, and to immigrant rights programs in Seattle. Some have chosen to go on for doctorates in economics, urban planning, and anthropology. Others are working in here in New York, finding spaces to apply what they have learned in the United Nations, in non-governmental organizations, in city government, and discovering new opportunities to improve their work and to continue to learn. A few weeks ago the Provost joined several of us at the United Nations' World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro where we counted 16 former GPIA students and collaborators working on international urban issues, from gender, to slum improvement, to community participation.

In all of this work, these graduates have adopted an active approach to constructing their careers and their next steps. They have engaged with problems, they have maintained their critical perspective on the situations they face, and they seem, based on my conversations with many of them, to have realized that how they work also affects the substantive outcomes. That is to say, process matters.

This evening I would like to briefly share with you a few thoughts I have had as the semester winds down and as I observe the external environment.

Recently I heard a tape of a talk given by the historian David McCulloch in 1987 when he remarked that there was a common public misperception that people in responsible positions behave responsibly. As we look around now, from the case of the oil spill in the Gulf, to the absence of financial regulation and misbehavior on Wall Street, to the failure of the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, or recent laws in Arizona, we can see that the assumption that people with public responsibilities actually behave responsibly is often the exception and not the rule.

This should remind us of the need to be alert to the assumptions which are presented to us and to constantly assess the frameworks within which we are working. In each of these cases it

is evident that dominant frameworks for thinking and action are seriously deficient. The performance of states and institutions, the formulation and application of laws and regulations, and the absence of ethically-based leadership are all highly problematic these days.

I would like to suggest to you this evening that this compromised external environment imposes tougher standards on ourselves as well: we must observe the world with keener eyes, we must understand historical antecedents, and we must be sensitive to the scale and diversity of forces and factors which determine specific situations. We must do so to understand more deeply and to locate things in their many contexts. Understanding must be a precondition for action. Instead of ready, fire, aim, we need to insist that readiness and focus should be a precondition for targeted action.

This evening I am reminding all of us of these rather basic notions, because the country and, I would dare say, the world seem to forgotten them. How is it, for example, that the US commander in Afghanistan is considering awarding soldiers for not firing into civilian populations? What does this tell us about the lack of understanding of the local context or indeed, the purpose of the war altogether? How is it that the President suggested that we need more off-shore drilling to reduce dependence on foreign oil when the Department of Interior apparently does not even follow its own guidelines with regard to assessment of environmental risks? Or how is that Greece is told that the solution to its debt problem is to reduce fiscal expenditures, contract its economy, and to borrow billions of dollars from the IMF and the European Union, a discredited response which used to be known as the failed Washington Consensus?

What does this mean for all of us? I believe it suggests that thinking and thinking hard is necessary. David McCulloch suggested to his 1987 audience that if they watched television, they should watch less and think more. The analogy for 2010 is obviously the computer and, perhaps – and here I may be displaying a generational bias – spending less time on being linked and connected to everyone we know, and more time on thinking about what is happening in the world, what is happening around us, what we want to do, what we need to do, and how we can do it.

McCulloch also reminded his audience that one useful way to think is to write. I realize that the end of the semester may not be a good time to remind graduating students of the importance of writing. McCulloch argued simply that writing is a way of thinking, of forcing ourselves to explicitly articulate what we think, and to communicate that.

I respectfully defer to my colleague, Robert Polito, on the importance of writing, but I would also say that formal writing, per se, is only one form of thinking. Designing a media production can also be a way of thinking, of representing something and communicating a specific message. Being effective in the world requires forethought. In a word, it requires design not simply as visual or physical design, but as intention. Design as intention. We all know, however, that intention by itself is not enough. We should, and do, demand follow through and action. We live in a social world, we must accept responsibility in a wider social and political sense.

These are not just graduation slogans, but, I would suggest, that is what is required of us, all of us.

I believe that this class of New School graduates is better trained and equipped for these responsibilities than ever before. You have worked hard, and your teachers have worked hard with you. We are confident about your energy, your creativity, and your social commitment.

In these last two years in the GPIA you have been immersed in different interpretations of the role of politics, nation states, economics, technology, culture, ideology, natural resources, and war in making the world of today. For some you were introduced in the GPIA to the seeming rationality of economics and macro-economic policy. Yet you quickly learned that other factors were important. How else could you explain differences between countries, between India and China, or Brazil and Mexico? You learned about human development, human rights, about Gini coefficients, and the importance of social indicators.

But you also learned that economics could not explain politics. You have become increasingly skeptical of theory, of so-called data whose reliability never really appears to be what it said it was. And you have learned that representation, from the drawing of maps, to the cutting of photographs, to the editing of films, and the very choice and manipulation of images also reflected someone's agenda and interests. During your years with us, your professors have noticed that your papers began to change. You became more analytical and less impressed with well-known authors whose ideas did not really jibe with what you were seeing around you.

Some of you took your search for truth on the road. You went to India and China where you saw that whole civilizations existed and were not particularly impressed with the West and certainly not with the United States. If you came from Ireland or Uruguay, you went to Nepal. If you came from Denmark or Norway, you went to Brazil. Not because you had to, but because you valued the opportunity of discovering other perspectives on your world. You discovered other ways of life, you became more global in your understanding, and your canvass became more complicated. Some of you went to Africa and to the slums in many cities around the world. You returned impressed with the levels of poverty and the scale of the problems to be addressed. No one returned to the GPIA as sure of the answers as they were before they left.

So even while the world has become more complicated, you have been getting stronger, developing those muscles that I mentioned on a hot August evening at orientation a long time ago. You are smarter, more analytical, more informed, more skilled, better writers, and more excited by the world around you. The world is even more interesting that you thought it would be, even though it is also very frustrating and at times, quite frightening.

So I want to conclude by challenging you this evening. You were optimistic when you applied to the GPIA and when you showed up for Orientation. Bob Kerrey was right at that Orientation when he said you had not given up. Well now, it's the time to get to work, to enter the fray, and to figure out what you can do to be part of the many solutions the world needs to find.

The world needs you. We need your brains, your energy, your courage, and your heart.

The New School is proud of who you are becoming. The faculty was happy to greet you when you walked in the door and we're delighted to see who you are as you leave. Graduates from other years are doing well. They have found meaningful jobs, they are struggling to make sense of the world of work, of adulthood, in some cases new families, and mostly, of seeing paths to the future.

Each one of you will also succeed in that struggle. We will be rooting for you. Come back and tell us how it's going. Let us know if some of your readings and papers really proved to be helpful. And tell us how much fun you're having. After all, it's your life. Go for it!

Provost Marshall, the GPIA faculty committee of Nina Khruscheva, Sean Jacobs, and Everita Silina reviewed nine theses which were nominated by faculty advisors for the GPIA Annual Thesis Prize. I would like to ask the nominees to rise: Maggie Corser, Amy Frame, Carol Messineo, Emily Molfino, Carina Molnar, Andrew Moyer, Jake Perry, Carmen Guadalupe Tomic, and Steve Torrente. Congratulations to all of you for excellent work. This year, the committee decided that the prize should be awarded to Amy Frame. Honorable mentions are awarded to Jake Perry and Lupe Tomic. Congratulations to you all.

In addition, the GPIA Faculty Committee of Mark Johnson, Phil Akre, and Fabiola Berdiel has reviewed the work of the nine teams of students completing the Practicum in International Affairs. The Committee has decided that the GPIA Award for the Distinguished Practicum should be awarded to the Global Video Team.

The PIA team consists of Hanna Frazin, Ximena Maroto Elias, Flannery Miller, Scott Miller, Nadia Claudi Pedersen, Christoffer Naess, Sean Thomas, and Ayelet Vardi.

Congratulations to the team for their work!