

By Congressman David Price in Raleigh, NC -

President Scott, distinguished trustees, faculty and staff, honored graduates, family and friends: I very much appreciate the opportunity to join you on this happy occasion and to honor this fine group of graduates. Our main order of business this afternoon is simply to offer our congratulations to the graduates and to the families, mentors and friends who helped them reach this point – and perhaps also to offer a little free advice and exhortation, as is customary on these occasions. But I also welcome the opportunity to reflect upon the mission of this school, on the kind of training you have received at Wake Tech and its relation to the future of our country.

This is kind of a homecoming for me. My association with Wake Tech began during my first years in Congress in the late 1980s, when I was welcomed often to the campus, and the college's leaders educated me about the need to make sure that community college students were participating fully in the student aid and other programs under the Higher Education Act. We also collaborated on a multi-year effort to create the Advanced Technology Education (ATE) program at the National Science Foundation. The idea was to provide support to pathbreaking institutions to develop new curricula and teaching methods and public-private partnerships that would then have a ripple effect across the nation. Wake Tech has been one of the most successful participants in that program. The working partnership that we developed along the way led to an invitation to speak to the graduating class of 1993. It's wonderful to be here with you again, 15 years later.

With that stroll down memory lane, let's move from the past to the future, which is what commencement is really about, after all. We're marking the beginning of a new phase of life, and I expect many of you are wondering, relishing, or stressing over what the future may hold.

I expect that many of you already have landed jobs that will be rewarding personally and financially. I can guarantee that the education and training you have completed have given you skills that our workplaces need, and you are likely to be rewarded many times over. Family income is typically more than 30 percent higher when the primary breadwinner has a two-year technical degree. For some of you, of course, there is more higher education to come, as you take advantage of the seamless transition from two-year to four-year colleges that leaders of our community colleges and of our state university system have worked so hard to put in place. Here, too, Wake Tech has led the way.

The training you've received at Wake Tech is not only relevant to your personal success; it is also relevant to the Triangle success story. Despite the downturns that have led to layoffs at some companies, the need for a well-trained workforce is at the top of the priority list for virtually every Triangle employer. So as Wake Tech has upgraded and diversified its curricula, and as you have participated in its rigorous training programs, you have not only opened opportunities for yourselves but have helped our region succeed in the new economy, with all that means for widening the winners' circle and improving our quality of life.

Our national quality of life is on our minds this year as we experience economic strains and face critical political decisions. When the congressional majority changed in 2007, I found myself chairman of the House Homeland Security Appropriations Committee. This job has only been in existence about 4 years, and I never would have imagined, when I came to Congress, that I would hold it. But since I do, I am often asked: Is our country safer and more secure than we were before 9/11, or before the Department of Homeland Security was formed in the wake of 9/11?

If we look at efforts to detect, deter, and respond to specific threats, the answer is a qualified yes, and it is our job to make that answer less qualified. But if we look at the broader context of security, both internationally and domestically, the answer is almost certainly no.

The security of our country fundamentally depends on the degree of friendship and respect we enjoy around the world. We have implacable adversaries with whom we must deal firmly, sometimes harshly. But we also have a long history of moral leadership in the world and a bipartisan foreign policy tradition predicated on mutually supportive alliances and cooperation through international organizations. In recent years our country has abandoned much of that legacy and has squandered the tremendous outpouring of worldwide public support for the United States that followed 9/11. We have a great deal of work to do.

Homeland security also has a domestic context, one that goes beyond the conventional understanding of that label. Let me express the point in budgetary terms. The Congress has rightly provided greatly increased resources – now approaching \$40 billion annually – for Homeland Security programs and agencies. I argue strongly for our Subcommittee's share of the federal budget – but only up to a point.

We could spend ever-increasing portions of the budget on countering one threat or another, real or imagined. But an outsized Department of Homeland Security budget, if it came at the expense of crumbling infrastructure, diminished public health, reduced economic competitiveness, and depleted human capital, would hardly add up to a more secure or confident nation. Recent years have seen a dangerous erosion of security in this broader sense. The same is true of our fiscal security and soundness, as the hard-won budget surpluses of the 1990s have given way to mountains of debt and an unprecedented dependence on foreign creditors.

So our investments in the Department of Homeland Security are not made in a vacuum. Thinking about security requires us to think about America's role in the world and about the full range of domestic needs we face. The agenda for repair, renewal, and reform is vast and urgent. It is within that broader agenda that the program of the still-new, still-consolidating Department of Homeland Security should take a proportionate place. It is also within this context that you should see the training you have received and the contributions Wake Tech is making to the strength and security of our region.

Now let me speak a bit more directly. It is not enough for you to receive a diploma here today and take your place in the high-tech workplace tomorrow, as important as that is and as satisfying as it will be. Today you attain the status of Wake Tech graduate and tomorrow you will be a valued employee, but you will also have enhanced potential as an informed and active citizen, and I urge you to take that responsibility within the broader community seriously. After all, the opportunities you've had and the prospects you anticipate owe a great deal to active and engaged citizens who have gone before.

The Research Triangle success story resulted from bold steps taken by a remarkable generation of business, educational, and governmental leaders, backed up by the political support and tax dollars of thousands of North Carolina citizens. For most of North Carolina's history, the colonial-era description of our state as a "vale of humility between two mountains of conceit" (namely Virginia and South Carolina) has been all too apt. For decades our economy depended on tobacco and textiles and not much else. It took vision and a fair amount of courage to see in those acres of worn-out farmland near the very small Raleigh-Durham airport a potential high-tech research center, bringing together in creative partnership business, higher education, and all levels of government. We rightly honor those who made this possible, and the graduates here today will be among those most tangibly reaping the benefits.

Wake Tech is making a critical contribution to the continuation and expansion of this success story, and I hope each of you as graduates will as well. This will require active and informed

citizenship, including participation in the political process. I don't know what image first comes to mind when you hear the word politics, but I hope it goes beyond mutually insulting 30-second ads, the ranting of talk show hosts, or selfish power-seeking by politicians. The fact is that politics in a democracy is an indispensable means of achieving our common purposes as a community. I learned that as a young man coming of age politically as the civil rights movement swept across the South -- a movement that pricked the nation's conscience and convinced thousands, then millions, that the barriers of segregation and discrimination must be broken down. I have always been grateful that this was my formative political experience, because it was such a positive one, demonstrating that committed people acting together, using the legitimate instruments of power and persuasion, could right ancient wrongs.

We have all had experiences, of course, that cast politics in a less favorable light. But it is important not to lose -- indeed we must insist upon -- that vision of politics in a democracy as an instrument of common purpose. For that is the kind of politics it will take, with each of us participating, whether as leaders, advocates, or informed citizens, if our community is to flourish and more people are to have the opportunity to prosper and to realize their dreams that we celebrate here today.

Let me end as I began: with heartfelt congratulations for what you, with the help and support of many, many people, have achieved. You have made it through Wake Tech's demanding program, often under trying circumstances, on tight budgets, balancing competing family and job demands. You have earned the admiration of this community and we look forward to the contributions you will continue to make. I wish for you good fortune as you take your skills, industry, and determination into the workplace. I wish for you the satisfaction of productive work that uses your full potential. And may you also make a positive contribution to those around you, giving as well as receiving, blessing even as you have been blessed, gladly assuming the joys and responsibility of citizenship.

Thank you and Godspeed.