Every Commencement Address extends warm and heartfelt congratulations to the graduates and their parents, spouses, children, relatives, and friends. What a wonderful time in the life of a graduate! A time when the future beckons even as you look back fondly on the good times you have enjoyed with friends and faculty. All the work and sacrifice has carried you to this culmination which opens new vistas on the future. In recognition of the dual significance of the occasion, we use the term Commencement to commemorate prior accomplishment and to welcome future challenge. However, you graduates deserve now to take some time to celebrate your achievements. By all means, savor the moment in the company of family and friends.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today, and please rest assured that I will not dally. Having forty years of Commencement experience, often as the Speaker, I understand that everyone came today because of what you have accomplished, not what I will say. To paraphrase one of the significant speeches in American history, few will remember what I say here today, but many will cherish the memory of your accomplishments. However, a few brief remarks seem appropriate for the occasion.

I particularly appreciate the chance to comment during my final Commencement, the first of what I hope will become a traditional ceremony on the historic Oval, made even more historic by the dedication this week of the Payne Family Native American Center, unique to this campus and symbolizing the effort to serve all Montanans. As most people know,
I will retire from the Presidency on 15 August 2010, 20 years to the day after assuming the position. Thus you graduates and I take our leave together this year: You to enter upon the great adventure of life after college, and I to launch yet another career in teaching, research and writing, and service. Undoubtedly, we also share a lingering sense of anxious anticipation as we contemplate the future.

As you enter the next phase of your life, keep in mind what worked for you to date. I doubt that any of you started college with the intention to fail. You knew from the outset that you had to perform to prevail. In doing so, you responded to a necessary rule that those who succeed must follow. Craig Barrett, former President of Intel, reminds graduates when he speaks at Commencement that “You cannot win unless you choose to compete.” That simple statement of fact often gets overlooked as people rush off in search of the shortest route to a goal. We in the United States have ignored the rule in the last couple of decades and as a result we lost world leadership defined in terms of the educational attainment of our citizens. In fact, we have fallen to the second tier of the international rankings and stand in danger of falling farther.

You graduates today have done your part. You have chosen to compete, and today marks victory for you and for the society in this first lap of a much longer race. For that good work, I commend and congratulate you. But always remember the rule, for the initial success does not guarantee the future. It bears repeating: “You cannot win unless you choose to compete.”

That leads to my second bit of advice, also in the form of a rule. Never forget that the education you have earned remains yours to do with as you choose. No one can take it from you, but you must choose to use it. Whether you enter the workforce or opt for additional education, you have built a foundation for whatever you decide. But you must choose the direction. I remember arriving forty-eight years ago at the place you occupy today and wondering what lay in store for me.
In 1962, I earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in History and Political Science from The University of Montana. As it happened, that education prepared me well for whatever course I chose to take, but I did not know it at the time. I realized only that I loved learning and the joy of intellectual competition. Fortunately, a four-year fellowship offered to me by Tulane University in New Orleans gave me the chance to pursue my passion and study for a doctoral degree. However, we cannot always control what happens in life, as we all learn sooner or later. My wife and I with our two sons made the long trip to New Orleans in a very hot summer only to find it necessary because of a health problem and financial challenges to return to Missoula.

When we arrived in Missoula, I sought the counsel of my former adviser and the History faculty. These solid supporters came to my rescue, providing a graduate assistantship which allowed me to earn a Master of Arts in History the next year. Thereafter, these faculty supporters assisted me in securing a fellowship from The University of Washington in Seattle to earn a Ph.D. in History in 1967. It all began here with the solid education I received from this University and the confidence I soon developed in the foundation that education provided. I have always remembered that the education I worked for and earned remained mine to use, never to lose. But knowing and appreciating that rule always led right back to the first one I mentioned earlier: “You cannot win unless you choose to compete.” You have already earned the status as winner. Stay the course.

I trust I have made clear in these comments how much I owe to others for whatever success I have achieved. I relied even more on the assistance and support I received from my immediate family—my wife, Jane, and my two sons—who supported my decisions for the nine years it took to complete my education and then to put it to use. They never waivered and their constant support truly made it possible for me to choose to compete and to win. I also had the opportunity to repay them later when they chose to compete by obtaining the education they needed to compete in today’s world.
We all rely on the help that others provide, and we thereby incur an obligation to help others as well.

Life often takes turns we never imagine possible. When I left Missoula in 1963, I hoped but did not know if I had wonderful opportunities before me. I had learned from four years of experience in the U. S. Navy, another year trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and four years in college that I had to have a guiding plan. Most people realize intuitively what it took me a few years to learn. If you do not know where you are going, you have no way of determining if or when you get there. And, as a result, you may find as Gertrude Stein did when she searched for her childhood home long since torn down and replaced with a parking lot: “There is no there there.” You obviously had a plan when you started college and it served you well. Develop a new one, with benchmarks to keep you informed of progress along the way. Henry Adams once famously commented that people have to be bridled and saddled to amount to much. He intended to remind us of the need to pursue worthy goals.

As you develop your plan, aim well and high and stretch yourself. You have prepared for the challenge and demonstrated your potential. Now develop it and follow your aspirations. In my own case, I planned to become a University faculty member out of love for a life of learning. I had no guarantee I could succeed, whether I would measure up in the final analysis. But I remembered my mother’s early advice to me: “If you think little of yourself, so will everyone else.” She intended to remind me of the value and function of self-respect. Another rule to keep in mind.

Study after study has concluded that people lacking confidence frequently stumble, not because they lack the talent and skills to succeed but because they doubt their own abilities. A famous Black historian put the matter in clear terms. The person who always enters the house by the back door lives in constant fear of rejection and failure. Know yourself, as you have demonstrated you do by your graduation today, and present yourself as a person of value and worth. Guide your conduct accordingly, behaving as
one entitled to and deserving of respect and acceptance. Understand that entitlement depends upon meritorious conduct. You cannot have one without the other. Always remember as well the difference between self confidence strong enough to admit error and make corrections and pride blinded by arrogance. Some one has described insanity as an unthinking insistence on taking the same actions time after time while always expecting a different outcome. Genuine self knowledge and self-respect allows for human error and correction.

I have one more rule, this one from my father. He came from the old school and believed firmly that children should earn their way. With great pride at the age of 12, I informed him that I had contracted with my grandfather to do odd jobs around the place and help with some timber work for $2.50 a day. My father congratulated me and said: “Always give him more than he pays you for. You will not need to search for a job if you do.”

I have found this rule invaluable, no matter the position I occupied. While those for and with whom I worked did not universally and consistently endorse what I did and how, they always applauded me for going well beyond the minimum required to get the job done. In addition, adherence to the rule gave me a sense of accomplishment and the confidence to take on larger tasks. Even as President of The University of Montana, I followed the rule. I assure you that real dividends accrue from doing so. The willingness to do the job well, no matter what it takes, frequently makes the difference between success and failure.

I will close with a rule of my own to add to the list: Always learn something during every stage of your life, no matter where you find yourself. As I mentioned earlier, I spent four years in the U.S. Navy prior to going to college, with a bit more than a year in Japan, Okinawa, and Taiwan. As a result, I understood even before going to college the life-changing benefits of an international experience. An international experience has huge importance for you graduates as you think about your future in an increasingly global and interdependent world. Seize the opportunity when you can to gain the
additional perspective that immersion in another culture provides. Never hesitate to ask for assistance to get that experience, for doing so will provide rich returns over your lifetime, and you will find people willing to help.

In closing, I believe you have probably realized that everything turns on the first rule I mentioned. “You cannot win unless you choose to compete.” The rule implies the obligation to do well whatever you attempt. Please understand that we who have known and supported you to this point in your lives will depend upon you to live up to your full potential. You have already made the choice to compete. For our sakes as much as your own, stay on course, making adjustments from time to time as conditions dictate. The future depends on what you make it. We have full confidence that you will make the most of it to the benefit of all.

Congratulations and thank you.