

**Commencement Address**  
**John Palfrey, Phillips Academy, June 2, 2019**

Welcome, all – trustees, faculty, and staff; faculty emeriti; trustees emeriti; alumni, families, friends, and – most important – members of the graduating Class of 2019. Thank you all for honoring this class, and all of us on the faculty and staff, with your presence today.

Before I say anything else, let me please start by acknowledging with gratitude – heartfelt gratitude – the adults in the Andover community. Andover thrives as a direct result of individual and collective diligence, support, and love. To all the adults who select our students in the admissions process, who care for our students every day, who care for this beautiful campus, who

provide us all with the resources we need, and who teach and help our students all the way along: Thank you. As this is my last commencement as Head of School, I'd like to ask you all to join me in an especially big, rousing round of applause for the faculty, staff, and faculty emeriti of Phillips Academy.

To the parents and grandparents, guardians and friends: You, too, deserve our heartfelt and enduring thanks. You have made great sacrifices to give our students the opportunity to attend Andover. Whether you come from down the street or across the world; regardless of whether your student received financial aid or not; no matter how involved you have been with the school, you have sacrificed time with your child at a crucial point in their life so that they could access the extraordinary educational opportunities that this school can

offer. Each of these students has grown, perhaps beyond recognition; they have worked very hard; and they are now ready, in most cases EXTREMELY ready, for the next chapter in their lives – all as it should be. On behalf of the faculty and staff, we thank you for sharing these terrific young people with us for their high school years. Thank you – I really mean that.

And to the Class of 2019: Congratulations and thank you. You have earned this big day. Keely and Nick, you have been exceptionally good leaders and role models as school copresidents. You have set a serious, positive, constructive tone. You have sought to leave the school a better place than you found it. You have challenged adults and students alike to do better and to be better. Keely, you challenged a distinguished university professor on a core statement of her

All-School Meeting address, in a way that was revelatory and important. Nick, you called on us as adults and students to forge closer bounds, to pay attention to our cross-generational relationship. You both have learned and grown as leaders in ways that I much admire. Job well done!

Seniors, if you cast your mind back to last September, we began this year, your final year, with a celebration that you will no doubt remember. We met in this very spot to dedicate this quadrangle in a special ceremony. With the help of Ava and Thaddeus and LCG, we gathered on these steps and on this grass to rename this quadrangle in honor of Richard T. Greener, Class of 1865. Mr. Greener is most likely the first African-American graduate of Phillips Academy or Abbot Academy and also the first African-American to graduate from Harvard

College. Mr. Greener went on to a long and distinguished career in education, law, and diplomacy. He was an important intellectual sparring partner of Frederick Douglass and a leading voice in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century movement for civil rights in America.

Seniors, you will always have the following distinction: you are the first class to graduate from Andover on the Greener Quadrangle. I can think of no more deserving group of young people than the Great Class of 2019.

Just as you are now linked forever to the legacy of Mr. Greener, Phillips Academy and Abbot Academy have been entwined with the history of this country from its inception. Recall that the Phillips family began their boys' school here on Andover Hill in

1778 – in the midst of a revolution. Samuel Phillips and Phoebe Foxcroft Phillips were friends and admirers of General George Washington, helping to provide munitions and organize soldiers to fight the British.

Shortly after he became president, George Washington came to Andover in 1789. He gave an important speech and in 1795 sent his great nephews to be educated here. Our campus today juxtaposes George Washington Hall – honoring our country's first president and, we must acknowledge, Virginian slaveholder – with Richard T. Greener Quadrangle, honoring our first African-American graduate.

A few months later in your senior year, members of the Class of 2019, our community lost the first United States president to

graduate from Phillips Academy. Not long after we dedicated the Greener Quadrangle, we mourned the loss of George Herbert Walker Bush, Andover class of 1942 and the 41<sup>st</sup> President of the United States. A few weeks ago, we celebrated his life through the visit of his granddaughter, Barbara Bush, who joined us for an All-School Meeting and unveiled with us a plaque bearing President Bush's name in Cochran Chapel.

What you may not know is that George Herbert Walker Bush, like George Washington, came to this campus shortly after he was elected president. In fact, exactly 200 years after President Washington came to Andover in 1789, President Bush came back to Andover in 1989. Bush, like Washington, gave an address and then planted a tree, brought from the White House grounds, which now grows partway down the vista, over there.

This is one of the things that I most love about Andover: it is a school that is linked inextricably to the history and founding values of America; at the same time, it is also a school that has helped to remake the landscape of this country through the work of its students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

This is the school of Richard T. Greener, Phillips Academy Class of 1865, and George Herbert Walker Bush, Phillips Academy Class of 1942; this is the school of Donna Brace Ogilvie, Abbot Academy Class of 1930, who had the vision to endow the Brace Center for Gender Studies – the only institution of its kind at a high school that I know of. This Andover is the school of Oscar Tang, Class of 1956, whose generosity lies at the heart of Andover's commitment as the only need-blind school of its



kind; and of activist Ai-jen Poo, Class of 1992, who demands that we afford those who work in domestic settings a life with dignity and basic human rights. This is the school of Amy Falls, Class of 1982, the first woman to be elected board president of Phillips Academy or Abbot Academy. May that diversity ever be so.

Seniors, you, too, are now linked to the history of this country, both through these presidents and through our graduates who have paved the way for reform of this country. I hope you will take deep inspiration from those who have come before you – both in honoring worthy traditions and in making new ones, fashioning a world that will, someday, live up to the ideals in our charter: youth from every quarter, *non sibi*, knowledge and goodness, *finis origine pendet*. As individuals, as a school, as a

nation, as a world: we are a work in progress. It is up to you – and to all of us – to continue this essential project. I believe in you and in what you will go on to do.

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Seniors, we have a final job to do together, you and I. Today, it's our job to say goodbye to Andover, at least for the time being.

George Herbert Walker Bush offered this advice when it came to saying goodbye:

“Be strong, be kind, be generous of spirit, be understanding and let people know how grateful you are. Don't get even. Comfort

the ones [you've] hurt and let down. Say your prayers and ask for God's understanding and strength. Finish with a smile and some gusto and do what's right ..."

We have all lived as part of a community that has inspired us and, yes, on occasion let us down. We haven't been perfect. I know as Head of School, I don't leave with a record of perfect decision-making; far from it. I know you'll all agree with me there! I know for a fact that no one of you leaves with a perfect record of academic prowess or a perfect batting average or an error-free record of being a friend.

Despite these imperfections, we leave behind a place that strives every day to live up to its values, a place with real humility, whose community members work hard to do what is

right – a place in which you have each played an essential part in the past one, two, three, or four years. We apologize to those we've wronged and express our understanding to those who have wronged us along the way. We take inspiration from the extraordinary things about this place and we learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. We learn from this learning institution and our part in it. We take its lessons with us, on to our next challenges. That, after all, is the meaning of Commencement.

For me, as we say goodbye, seniors, the most important thing is to let people know how grateful we are. I thank each one of you for being a part of my life and the lives of my family for these past seven years. I thank my colleagues on the staff and the faculty for their devotion to the cause of access to

education, for their incredibly hard work during a demanding school year, and for believing in each one of our students. I thank the board for being the very best group of bosses I could have imagined – and most of all, to Peter Currie, the board president, for his deep wisdom, unstinting support, and bottomless personal generosity. I thank each parent, grandparent, and guardian for this precious time with your loved ones. And, with a very full heart, I thank the students of Andover for making this the most wonderful place to live, work, and learn – and the most fulfilling job I could imagine.

Students – soon to be graduates – of the Class of 2019, I ask that you, in turn, find ways to thank those who have supported you along this journey – your parents, guardians, teachers,

coaches, mentors, and friends. In my view, that's the most important job you – and I – have today.

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Eight years ago, Peter Currie, Barbara Landis Chase, and the Board of Trustees invited me to speak to the class of 2012 and those enrolled at PA when I was appointed. That day, I looked out on a sea of faces in the Smith Center; I wasn't yet the head of school and I didn't really know a single student then. I wasn't entirely sure what to say.

I had to say something though, so I built my short remarks upon a hunch. Of Andover as a high school, I told the students:

It doesn't get any harder than this; and it doesn't get any better than this.

Not that anyone would remember my saying that, but it was a risky thing to claim. I wasn't sure if it would prove true.

You, seniors, now know what it takes to get through Andover.

You know that you can take on an extremely hard academic challenge, you can live with a group of students from all over the world and a diverse array of backgrounds, and you can emerge well-prepared for what comes next in college and in life beyond.

After seven years as your head of school, I think that prediction more or less turns out to be true. I suspect most of you would agree, or perhaps will come to agree with me about Andover:

It doesn't get any harder than this; and on most days, it doesn't get any better than this.

As you say goodbye to Andover, to one another, and to all of us, I hope and trust that you will remember these things. I hope you will take with you Andover's deep and abiding connection to our country's history. I hope that our shared connection to enduring ideas and values, as yet unfulfilled but within sight, has found its way into your bones, as it has for me. And I hope that you will leave this place with the knowledge that once you've done Andover, you know you can do just about



anything. Use this sure foundation – this extraordinary foundation – wisely and for good, in the spirit of *non sibi*.

Members of the Class of 2019, I wish you nothing but the very best in what lies ahead. We – as your faculty members and as trustees of this school – we have huge faith in each one of you – starting with your ability to say goodbye well today and then to go out and improve the world through your life’s work. I am so excited to learn about what you will do and to stay connected to your story and to the story of this extraordinary Andover community.

In closing: Members of the Class of 2019, let’s go out with a big smile together. Godspeed and thank you.