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Skidmore College Commencement Remarks
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Your time here at Skidmore has been a difficult four years for the American people. Partway through your freshman year, an economic downturn began that turned into the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The recovery from this downturn has been anemic. Unemployment remains at its highest level in many decades, especially for your age group.

Downward pressures on wages, salaries, and benefits are still strong. Some of you will graduate with large debts hanging over your heads. Many of you will graduate with prospects less attractive than those of your predecessors several years ago. If I were in the position that a good many of you find yourselves, I might be tempted to wallow in self-pity.

But as someone with more than a half-century of experience since I graduated from college, I can assure you that things will get better for most of you. And as an historian, I have learned to take the long view. My parents were married in 1935, in the middle of the worst depression this country has ever known, one that went on, with rises and dips, for an entire decade. Many people lost faith in the American system of democracy and capitalism during that dismal decade. Extremist movements flourished, from Fascism on the right to Communism on the left. Hitler came to power in Germany; Stalin carried out purges that killed millions in the Soviet Union; Japan attacked China in the first step toward the conquest of East Asia. Prospects for peace and prosperity—in America and abroad—appeared nil. Most Americans could not remember a worse time, or imagine

that things would ever improve.

Yet my parents, just out of college, decided to get married. And more to the point, they decided to have a child, who turned out to be me. I was born in 1936, a brother was born in 1939, and another brother in 1944, in the middle of a war that for a time seemed like it might destroy Western civilization. I think they had faith that we would grow up in a better world than were born into. And so it proved to be. My parents worked hard. They scrimped and saved to make sure that all of their children—I turned out to be the oldest of seven—got a college education. They imbued us with the values that helped us overcome various obstacles and to get ahead in life. They took the long view during difficult times in the 1930s and 1940s—more difficult than today in most respects—and their faith in the future paid off. I am confident that a similar faith can pay off for you.