

# JOHN HARVARD'S JOURNAL COMMENCEMENT 2007



## Attend to the Cursed

FEW WHO STOOD at a Harvard podium during Commencement week mentioned the war in Iraq. Joshua Patashnik '07, of Adams House and San Diego, did so in his Harvard Oration during Class Day cel-

ebrations on Wednesday, June 6, a speech that mostly was a brief for humility.

"We need more people willing to admit that their political opponents are sometimes right," said Patashnik, who moves on from Harvard to Washington, D.C., and a job as a reporter for the *New Republic*.

"We need fewer people unyieldingly convinced that their religious beliefs or lack thereof constitute the only acceptable incarnation of absolute truth.... Above all, we need always to recognize, and indeed embrace, our own fallibility. If I have learned anything since September of 2003, it is that even the most brilliant scholars are quite often wrong.... And if we, collectively, have learned anything since March of that year, it is that no nation, no matter how just its intentions and how great its might, is immune from the law of unin-

**Above, from left: New Ph.D.s Meredith Fisher, of Cambridge, Melanie Adrian, of Waterloo, Ontario, and Melissa Jenkins, of Charlotte, North Carolina. This was a bumper year for Ph.D.s, with 556 conferred, up from 483 in 2006. Top: Tracy E. Nowski '07 delivers her Ivy Oration (see page 50).**

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FROM TOP: JIM HARRISON; STU ROSNER



tended consequences.”

Patashnik was followed at the podium by Tracy E. Nowski '07, of Lowell House and Toronto, who gave one of two Ivy Orations, traditionally humorous bits. “There’s no denying that most of us learned some stuff while we were here,” she said. “Before coming to Harvard, I, for one, had no idea that pickles and cucumbers were in any way related. Don’t worry though, I’ve got that all under control now. Pickles are boys, cucumbers are girls, and cucumbers aren’t very good at science.”

She “used to have a lot more questions,” Nowski explained, “but as a women’s studies concentrator, Larry Summers answered most of mine a while ago.”

Almost nobody else at a Commencement podium alluded to the homegrown tumult of recent years, the breakdown of the five-year presidency of Lawrence H. Summers, who resigned that office in February 2006, effective at the end of that academic year. Officially, Harvard wrapped up that contentious period diplomatically, awarding Summers, now the Eliot University Professor, an honorary degree (opposite), standard operating procedure with retired presidents. In introducing him on Commencement day, the provost

noted that “His approach was assertive and—it might be fair to suggest—not without controversy. But the priorities he worked to advance continue to exert a strong influence on this great University, as we look forward.” Harvard also awarded an honorary degree to lawyer Conrad K. Harper, who resigned his seat on the Harvard Corporation, the senior governing board, in July 2005, saying that he could no longer support the president. (Corpora-

Above: Degree candidates from the Business School (left), and flower-bedecked Jennifer D.M. Chang '07 and Madeleine I. Baverstam '07, both of Lowell House and Newton, Massachusetts. Left: Yoojin Choi, Ph.D. '06, also of Newton, with her daughter, Dawn Jang. Far left: Eyenga Bokamba, Ed.M. '07, of Minneapolis. Below: Nicholas P. Vines, Ph.D. '07, of Sydney, Australia, in sunglasses, and Jesse D.

Rodin, Ph.D. '07, of New York City, who both received their doctorates in music, sing the “Harvard Hymn.” Left: Cesar Ernesto Oyervides-Cisneros, Ed.M. '07, of Fontana, California.

tion member Robert E. Rubin, who was, perhaps, Summers’s strongest supporter on the board, was reportedly in Cambridge on Wednesday for a Corporation meeting, but did not attend Commencement the next day.)

Returning reunioners from other troubled times must surely have been struck to notice that also missing from the Com-

mencement scene were buttons, banners, and armbands on the young, wearing their opinions on their sleeves. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof '82, who delivered the address on Class Day at the Kennedy School of Government, had an explanation for the lack of conspicuous protestations. He also sounded the undoubted theme of Commencement oratory this year—public service.

“We need idealism and we certainly need a moral compass and moral outrage,” said Kristof, “but it’s so important that idealism and that outrage be tethered to pragmatism and empiricism. It needs to be based on a really deep familiarity with the local circumstances—with a sense of how we can, actually, in the nitty-gritty, improve peoples’ lives—and not just be about symbolism...

“We Baby Boomers,” he said, “were idealistic but not often—not always—very effective in what we did. Our reflexive notion about how to save the world was to hold a street demonstration, a protest, and in some cases that worked very well. In others, it really didn’t. These days there are, I think, a lot more people who are motivated by idealistic goals, but also have a lot of very practical tools about how to make that difference. Instead of just demonstrating against poverty, they may start an after-school literacy program, or they’ll organize a clinic in a low-income area, or a microcredit program. They’ll use metrics every step of the way to see what is making a difference, what is the most cost-effective way of doing so. In other words, if you want to make a difference, then I think we have a much better understanding today than we did a generation ago about how precisely to do that.”

“Many of you,” Patashnik observed in his Class Day talk, “will come to hold positions of great responsibility and re-



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**Presidents (clockwise from top) Derek Bok, Lawrence H. Summers, Neil L. Rudenstine, and president-elect Drew Gilpin Faust (in a Penn gown for the last time)**

ward in our society—or at least the managers of Harvard’s endowment hope so.... May God grant us many blessings in life,” he ended by saying, “and may we always accept them with the earnest gratitude of those who know what it means to be cursed.” (He was, admittedly, referring in part to the Curse of the Bambino, which was lifted for Red Sox fans during his sophomore year when the team won the World Series after an 86-year interval of anguish.)

The star speakers of the week, former

president Bill Clinton and Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, LL.D. '07, unambiguously urged their listeners to attend to the cursed of the world, those suffering terrible inequalities of wealth, health, and opportunity (see page 55 for excerpts from their speeches).

Similarly, in his Baccalaureate address in Memorial Church on the Tuesday of Commencement week, President Derek Bok had cautionary words for seniors about spending their lives wholeheartedly

in the pursuit of material rewards. He recalled a tale told by cancer specialist Jerome Groopman, Recanati professor of medicine. “A middle-aged man came to him,” said Bok, “with an advanced cancer condition. He had been a very successful financier, a deal-maker, a venture capitalist, an expert at making a quick

return on his money. Having discovered his illness playing golf with Japanese clients, he had visited all the obvious places in search of a cure.” But in the discouraging months that followed, and after reflecting on his life, “he soon came to the conclusion that he had been a selfish, un-

pleasant individual who cared only about himself and had had an essentially useless career. And now, when it was too late to change, he discovered that he had nothing worth living for.” Money matters a whole lot less to happiness, said Bok, than most people think.

Next day, the *Crimson* reported the results of its survey of the career trajectory of 901 graduating seniors. Half of those sampled are entering the workforce straightaway—58 percent of the men and 43 percent of the women into finance and consulting.