


















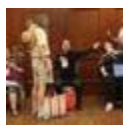
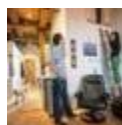


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Bloomberg assails lack of tolerance for diverse ideas

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 29, 2014



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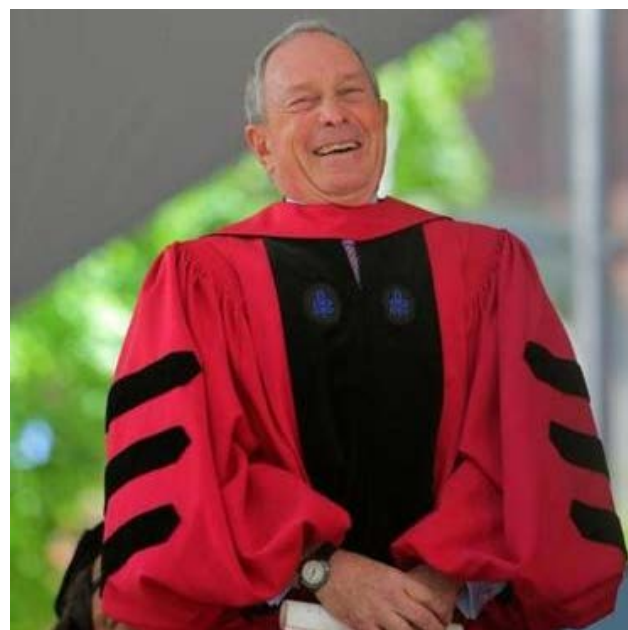
CAMBRIDGE — Michael R. Bloomberg implored Harvard University graduates Thursday to ardently defend the rights of others, citing what he described as growing intolerance for different religions, political ideas, and even college commencement speakers.

“Tolerance for other people’s ideas and the freedom to express your own are . . . perpetually vulnerable to the tyrannical tendencies of monarchs, mobs, and majorities, and lately we’ve seen those tendencies manifest themselves too often, both on college campuses and in our society,” the 72-year-old entrepreneur and philanthropist said at the university’s 363d commencement, held in Harvard Yard.

“On every issue you must follow the evidence where it leads and listen to people where they are,” the former New York City mayor told 6,000-plus undergraduate and graduate students who earned degrees. “If you do that, there is no problem we cannot solve, no gridlock we cannot break, no compromise we cannot broker,” he added.

Bloomberg also condemned how, he said, college campuses seem to increasingly profess only liberal viewpoints and refuse to listen to conservative ideas. “A liberal arts education must not be the art of liberalism,” he said.

He said he was disturbed by how numerous commencement



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg enjoyed a moment as he received his honorary doctorate at Harvard.

speakers either had invitations rescinded or decided themselves to cancel appearances amid protests over their views or actions. Among them: Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, who withdrew from Smith College's commencement because of student and faculty criticism of the agency's policies.

"The more we embrace the free exchange of ideas and the more we accept that political diversity, the healthier we are and the stronger our society will be," Bloomberg said.

An estimated 32,000 students, faculty, parents, alumni, and guests gathered under mild, sunny skies at the leafy outdoor Tercentenary Theatre.

In the morning portion of commencement Harvard conferred honorary degrees on eight people:

Former president George H.W. Bush; Aretha Franklin, known as the Queen of Soul, who delivered a moving rendition of the national anthem to resounding applause; author Isabel Allende; Patricia A. King, a pioneer in bioethics on stem cell research and human experimentation; acclaimed botanist Peter H. Raven; Seymour Slive, art historian, Harvard professor emeritus, and former Fogg Art Museum director; Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel Prize-winning economist; and Bloomberg.

Before Bush received his honor, Harvard poked fun at him by recalling one of his extracurricular activities at his alma mater, a certain Connecticut college.

"It is seldom on this stage that we take the occasion to honor a former member of the cheerleading squad at Yale," Harvard provost Alan Garber told the crowd before rattling off the many accomplishment and milestones the country's 41st president has amassed in his 89 years.

Drew Faust, president of the university, praised Bush: "With faith, courage, and service true, his eyes ever fixed on points of light, he piloted our nation through changeful skies."

Then she, too, made a lighthearted reference to the school colors of rivals Yale and Harvard.

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“His cap was blue, his house was white, and now his robe is crimson,” she said, drawing laughter.

During his speech, in the afternoon position of commencement, Bloomberg, a Medford native and Harvard Business School alumnus, also sprinkled his remarks with humor. He rattled off a list of places around campus that have changed since he studied there.

“The old Holyoke Center is now named the Smith Campus Center. Don’t you just hate it when alumni put their names all over everything?” he asked. “I was thinking about it this morning as I walked into the Bloomberg Center.” Bloomberg helped pay to build that center several years ago, in honor of his father.

But the focus of his speech, delivered in strident tones, called for more tolerance and less censorship. He listed recent examples, including what he called misguided efforts to block construction of an Islamic center near ground zero.

“Our union of 50 states rests on the union of two values, freedom and tolerance, and it is that union of values that the terrorists who attacked us on Sept. 11, 2001 and on April 15, 2013, are most threatened,” he said.

Bloomberg, a political independent, assailed what he called the unwillingness of some to listen to facts on such hot-button issues as gay marriage (which he supports) and climate change (he serves as a UN envoy on the issue).

Before the festivities began, Parinaz Bassiri slipped off her shoes to stand on a folding chair.

That height advantage, and a quick cellphone call, allowed the Long Island resident to signal to her son, Jacob Bassiri, who graduated from Harvard Business School.

“We are very, very happy and proud,” she said.

Jacob texted her his thoughts.

“Most schools teach you facts,” he wrote. “At HBS, you gain perspective. The difference is facts are today’s common knowledge, but perspective helps you see past today and change the world.”

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Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly referred to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.



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