

Washington University in St. Louis - 2018 Commencement Address

<https://commencement.wustl.edu/history-traditions/speakers-honorees/speakers/anne-marie-slaughters-2018-address/>

[Anne-Marie Slaughter](#) is a renowned foreign policy expert, distinguished scholar, frequent public commentator, nonprofit leader, former top official at the U.S. Department of State and author of a widely read article that sparked a national debate around women's work-life balance. During the Commencement ceremony, Slaughter will also receive an honorary doctor of laws degree.

Full transcript of Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2018 Commencement address

Thank you. You may be hoping that my speech is shorter than my introduction, but it was a truly wonderful introduction.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is American renewal. Not just as a graduating class, but as a generation. You are graduating at a moment of profound national division and political dysfunction. It is time to renew our politics, to mount a great wave of reform as we did in the late 19th century, and recreate a system that can, in fact, enact the will of the majority and respect the rights of the minority.

You are receiving a degree at a great university that is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and truth at a moment in which the very possibility of truth is in deep doubt. It is time to renew our faith in facts, reason and the accumulation of knowledge; to understand that it is simultaneously possible for individuals to have their own truths based on perspectives shaped through particular life experiences, and for us, collectively, to strive for a common truth.

The motto on the seal behind me is "per veritatem vis," strength through truth. We will, indeed, be stronger if we can hear and engage with each other's truths while still believing in facts, lies and reality.

You are graduating at a time of deep disquiet about the future. Let's start with your own futures; specifically, jobs. The stock market may be way up and employment way down, but the steepest upward curve is rising uncertainty. All we can tell you is the jobs you are likely to get now will not exist later, and the jobs that you will get later have not been invented yet.

It is time to renew our economy and the social infrastructure that supports it. We must have an economy that no longer distinguishes between full-time and part-time work, or, indeed, even between paid and unpaid work, since the work of raising a family and caring for others is just as essential to human well-being as work that brings in a paycheck.

We need a social infrastructure that provides for portable benefits, affordable and accessible lifelong education and universal health care. With that foundation, all Americans will be able to adapt to whatever life throws our way and have a realistic shot at growing, thriving and supporting a family.

But why renewal, and why you specifically?

Why renewal? Because it can unite both sides of the political aisle. Liberals embrace progress and love the new; conservatives hold to tradition and revere the old. But often the best way to move forward is not to tear down, but to rebuild, giving new life to the best of what is old while rejecting and discarding the worst.

It is also a way to reaffirm our commitment to the things we hold most dear. Couples renew their vows to enter a new phase in marriage. Nations can renew their ideals to enter a new phase in their history.

Why renewal? Because it's the American way. It acknowledges a process of striving, falling short and striving again.

Abraham Lincoln, a fellow Midwesterner who lived only a hundred miles from here, understood better than anyone the inevitable and perpetual gap between our ideals and our reality as a nation, and the necessity of continually striving to close that gap.

Lincoln resurrected his political career when he argued a detailed and passionate brief against slavery in Peoria in 1854. He insisted that the "spirit of '76" and the defense of slavery could not co-exist, and he called for purification and renewal. "Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust," he said. "Let us re-purify it. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it the practices and policy which harmonize with it."

In the Gettysburg Address, perhaps our nation's most famous speech, he similarly framed the Civil War as a struggle to ensure that the nation brought forth in 1776 would have a "new birth of freedom."

Over half a century later, during another great national crisis, Franklin Roosevelt made his case to the nation as a presidential candidate. Speaking at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in September 1932, he hearkened back to the social contract set forth in the Declaration of Independence, a contract in which the people granted power to the government in return for a guarantee of certain rights.

In the conditions of the Great Depression, Roosevelt argued the changing social conditions demanded a new bargain between government and people, that "recognize the new terms of the old social contract." Old vessels, new wine, the work of renewal.

That work has been the province of citizen reformers just as much as presidents. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King and many other American heroes demanded that America make good on its founding promises by recommitting to our ideals and closing the gap between word and deed.

Closer to home, one of St. Louis' great native sons, via Germany, Union general and senator Carl Schurz offered a maxim that defines our duty as citizens. On the floor of the Senate, responding to another senator who proclaimed, "My country, right or wrong," Carl Schurz said, "My country, right or wrong. If right, to be kept right; if wrong, to be set right."

"To be set right" is the work of renewal. Not to destroy and start over, but to return to the path we profess to follow.

So, if renewal is the mission, why is it your mission? Because American renewal is happening from the bottom up and the heartland out.

During the Great Depression, the renewal of America's social contract happened from the top down through the laws, policies and programs of the New Deal. Reformers flocked to Washington and ran their experiments across the land.

After the Great Recession, change is coming mostly from cities and states pushing back against the polarization and paralysis of national politics. The laboratories of democracy, in Brandeis' great phrase, are once again in action.

Today, if you want to make positive change, do not leave Washington University for Washington, D.C. Go back to your hometowns, state capitals, or bustling regional cities — your parents are really glad to hear me say that! Go to where you can participate in the reconnection of citizen action to positive public outcomes.

That transmission belt is broken in our national politics. It cannot be repaired over the long distances of presidential and congressional elections. We must begin anew, step by step, if we are ever to rebuild public trust.

If you're an aspiring business person or entrepreneur, go to where the real estate is cheap and the community is strong, where new tech sectors are springing up by reinventing traditional businesses from manufacturing to media.

If you're an aspiring architect, go renovate your hometown's downtown, putting beautiful old buildings to new uses.

If you're an aspiring journalist, go reweave the fabric of local civic life by creating or joining new models of producing local news.

And even if you're interested in foreign policy, as I am, know that Los Angeles has just appointed a deputy mayor for international affairs. Cities in every state have extensive sister city networks and work actively to attract foreign trade and investment.

Last week, James and Deborah Fallows published a book entitled "Our Towns: A 100,000 Mile Journey into the Heart of America," a book that every parent and grandparent should immediately order as a graduation present for all of you. Just wait until I finish speaking before you pull out your phones.

After five years of visiting towns and small cities across the country, the Fallows describe a vibrant landscape of change and renewal, of "ideas and plans" that are "being tested in towns we never would have suspected by people who would never join forces in the national capital, but who work together 'at home.'"

But why you, the graduates of Washington University, people of this place in this city at this time? Because St. Louis is the heart of the heartland. It embodies much of what is best and what is worst about this country.

St. Louis came of age as the Gateway to the West, a center of industry, energy and optimism about America's future. It was the nation's fourth-largest city by 1900, a hub of trade, manufacturing and advertising, giving Madison Avenue a run for its money. It supported music, art and education, creating an intellectual and cultural mecca not just for the Midwest, but for the whole country.

Ideas and solutions have long rippled outward from this city. The Transcendentalists were the first wave of American public intellectuals after the founders. They are inextricably associated with New England: white

steeped churches, the town greens of Concord and Lincoln, the still reflections of Walden Pond, the abolitionist salons of Boston.

I suspect, however, that you are far less aware of the equal influence of the St. Louis Hegelians, an active group of St. Louis philosophers and cultural critics, men and women who were in regular correspondence with the New England Transcendentalists and influenced the existence and content of the Transcendentalists' Concord Academy, founded in 1879.

1879 also saw the establishment of the Manual Training School For Boys here in St. Louis, created by the dean of the WashU polytechnic faculty, Calvin Woodward. He took parts of the MIT collegiate curriculum and adapted it for high schoolers to teach them not only mathematics, language, literature, history and science, but also manual skills as preparation for college or industry and in recognition of the dignity and value of manual work.

His curriculum took off across the country. By 1900, a hundred cities had copied it, and it soon became part of the public education curriculum.

Today, that innovation continues. Last year, the Midwest Cyber Center and the St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment launched one of the nation's first cybersecurity apprenticeship programs for 18-year-olds with a high school education. Those apprenticeships are the 21st century equivalent of the Manual Training Institute. It's a model that can spread across the country.

VBRC, the country's first center to help veteran entrepreneurs, was founded here in 2004 and has provided services to more than 10,000 veterans and their families in Missouri and neighboring states.

And St. Louis has a thriving academic, commercial and civic tech scene, with startups and organizations collecting data to see whether or not policy interventions actually work.

All is not rosy, however. St. Louis has also been, as it is now, at the center of the racial tensions that have ripped this nation apart. It was a border town in a slave state next to a free state. Dred Scott, the enslaved man at the heart of the Supreme Court's decision to uphold slavery, was sold in St. Louis as a slave, taken to a free state, and brought back to St. Louis where he was, once again, enslaved.

St. Louis was at the center of tensions between black and white workers during the great migration of African-Americans northward, resulting in one of the nation's worst incidents of racial violence — domestic terrorism — with the East St. Louis massacres in 1917.

Those of you graduating today who have been here for four years or more have seen the bitter eruption of those same racial tensions with the shooting of Michael Brown and the Ferguson riots. Those riots uncovered deeper patterns of financial and political injustice and state violence that mark the boundaries of modern segregation. They gave rise to Black Lives Matter and a renewed civil rights movement. At the same time, many of us have become newly aware of the fear and adrenaline surging through members of our police forces sent out to keep the peace in cities awash in guns.

In the work of renewal, facing failure is just as important as cataloging success. We cannot celebrate the great achievements of our past without acknowledging the injustice, exclusion, violence and inhumanity that have made a mockery of our ideals for so many among us.

We cannot renovate our national house without understanding that many of the materials used to build it are dangerous and even deadly to the present occupants. Much of the decoration that our predecessors found lovely is now ugly in our eyes. We must learn to see and accept the whole truth, not just the parts we like.

But neither can we move forward propelled only by anger and fear. Just as we must see the parts of our past that we wish to preserve, we must be able to imagine a future that we wish to achieve; a future of equality for all Americans, regardless of gender, color, creed, race, sexual orientation or national origin. A future in which there will be no need for red tape in support of "Title Mine." A future of lifelong learning and earning, caring and sharing. A future of technology and humanity. A future, and make it yours, of remembrance and renewal.

Congratulations to you all, and to the loved ones, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni who got you here today. Thank you.