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George F. Will commentary: Grads should work hard to make their luck



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Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana and current president of Purdue University, knows that no one in the audience is there to hear a commencement speaker. When, however, he addressed his institution's class of 2016, it heard him distill into a few lapidary paragraphs a stance toward life that illuminates this political season.

A rite of spring in America is, Daniels noted, the dispensing of diplomas that are similar in what they announce but dissimilar in what they actually denote. They all pronounce the recipient to be a bachelor of this or a master of that. There is, however, evidence, as abundant as it is depressing, that there are enormous differences between the seriousness of the curriculums students study and the rigor with which their mastery of them is measured: "As employers have come to learn, many diplomas tell little or nothing about the holder's readiness for work or for life."

This matters, because diplomas often are credentials that are not credible, and because ample studies of happiness demonstrate that the most important predictor of it is, Daniels said, "earned success." This involves sustained, difficult effort to surmount setbacks. And yet, said Daniels, perhaps the most dangerous of today's many pernicious ideas is that "life is more or less a lottery. That we are less masters of our fate than corks floating in a sea of luck."

Daniels spoke six days after President Barack Obama told Howard University's class of 2016: "Yes, you've worked hard, but you've also been lucky. That's a pet peeve of mine: People who have been successful and don't realize they've been lucky. That God may have blessed them; it wasn't nothing you did."

Nothing. Hence the progressive agenda: Government must comprehensively regulate, redistribute and generally fine-tune society in order to engineer "fairness" to counter life's pervasive and pernicious randomness ("luck"). Obama's words at Howard were, of course, congruent with his 2012 campaign statement that "if you've got a business, you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen." So society did, with you contributing a bit.

Daniels told his graduates, "I hope you will tune out anyone who, from this day on, tries to tell you that your achievements are not your own." He conceded the obvious: "I'm not saying that luck never plays a part; of course it can." But unless it is tragically bad luck, "it almost never decides a life's outcome." Although you cannot eliminate luck from life's equation, "you can tilt the odds in your favor" by common-sense behavior — making healthy choices, getting and staying married, and, especially, working hard.

Daniels quoted Thomas Edison: "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." And movie pioneer Samuel Goldwyn: "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

Progressives understand that their program for a government-centered society becomes more plausible the more people believe that work — individual striving — is unavailing. Government grows as fatalism grows, and fatalism grows as progressivism inculcates in people the demoralizing belief that they are victims of circumstances.

Without explicitly mentioning the paranoia currently convulsing many campuses, Daniels identified its origin. He said that "even more absurd" than the idea that life is a lottery is the idea that "most of us are victims of some kind, and therefore in desperate need of others to protect us against a world of predators and against our own gullibility."

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Daniels' words to the class of 2016 clarify why the 2016 presidential campaign offers an echo, not a choice. The presumptive Democratic nominee is a progressive committed to government ambitious enough to iron the wrinkles of luck out of life and to distribute equity to life's victims, meaning to everyone. The presumptive Republican nominee is a world-class whiner who is telling Americans that they are comprehensively victimized (by wily Chinese exporters, manufacturers making Oreo cookies abroad, freeloading allies, etc.).

Purdue has the president the nation needs.

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