

Council President Alex Padilla
Commencement Address
Monroe Law and Government Magnet School
North Hills, CA
June 13, 2002

Good afternoon, and welcome once again to Commencement Ceremonies for the James Monroe Law & Government Magnet School Class of 2001! Go Vikings!

It's an honor for me to speak before you, the Monroe Magnet School graduates and the hundreds of friends, family, and alumni who are here to join you to celebrate this great day, this milestone in your life.

Graduation Day is an opportunity for each of you to reflect on your academic career here at Monroe. At the same time, you are thinking about the next phase of your life – whether it's going to college, entering the workforce full-time, raising a family, serving your country, or travelling the globe.

It wasn't too long ago that I was wearing a cap and gown at my own graduation from high school in 1991. The feeling I had at that moment was the same feeling you undoubtedly have right now.

But you, as Monroe Magnet graduates, are already a step ahead. When I went to high school, and then became an engineering student in college, I got a little sidetracked from what I found to be my true calling – public service.

The great comedienne Lily Tomlin once said, "Ninety eight percent of the adults in this country are decent, hardworking, honest Americans. It's the other lousy two percent that get all the publicity. But then, we elected them."

What I hope you realize, despite Ms. Tomlin's humor, is that it is possible to be decent, hardworking, and be in public service.

As graduates, you already have a grounding and a focus on law and government. Your internship opportunities here in the Valley in local political offices, in the public defenders' office, and your partnership with UCLA and area law firms have enabled you to take what you learn in the classroom and apply it practically in a professional setting. I've even heard a story that students in Mark Elinson's class a year or so ago did some research and found that Senator Barbara Boxer had not

taken a strong enough position in favor of child labor laws, and subsequently petitioned her office and received not only a response, but action and a reversal of her previously held position. That's citizenship in action – petitioning one's government for a redress of grievances.

From mock trials, to learning about crime labs, international law, and in-depth studies of the legislative process, you have been given the grounding and the foundation to pursue a future in public service – now, more than ever, a calling that is seeming to earn the respect it has always deserved.

A prominent American once said in a domestic policy address:

“Dangers from abroad are not less deserving of attention. Experiencing the fortune of other nations, the United States may be again involved in war, against a party that wants to overturn our Government, to break our Union, and demolish us as a nation. Our distance from other nations may form some security against these dangers, but they ought to be anticipated and guarded against.”

This leader wasn't Tom Ridge. This wasn't George W. Bush. Nor was this George Bush Sr. This leader was none other than the Fifth President of the United States in his 1817 Inaugural Address. His name is James Monroe.

James Monroe was not known as an intellectual, as an orator, or a good writer. It's questionable if he would have graduated in the top half of his class here in North Hills. But he was known for his level-headedness, and an integrity that endeared him to others – skills that would serve him well in Congress, in the Senate, as an ambassador to Britain and France, as Governor of Virginia, as Secretary of State, Secretary of War, and as President.

The world in 1817 was changing – the Louisiana Purchase had just a few years earlier in 1803 changed the American landscape, paving the way – literally – for the American philosophy of Manifest Destiny to drive our westward expansion, eventually ending here on the West Coast.

And just a few years later, Monroe would sign the Missouri Compromise, granting slave status to Missouri while making Maine a free state. Although benevolently labeled a Compromise, slavery, as we all know, would drive our country to split

right down the middle, with brother fighting against brother in our nation's bloodiest conflict.

The issues that faced our nation in 1817 are the same issues we faced in 1917, in 1941, and today, in 2002.

The names have changed. And the names of nations have changed. The nature of international affairs have changed. But the challenges have not changed.

While slavery no longer exists, issues of race and ethnicity continue to be a salient issue in American society. And this fall, depending on what the courts finally decide, a ballot measure sponsored by University of California Regent Ward Connerly – the so-called “Racial Privacy Initiative” – will be a hot topic of discussion not just here in California, but nationwide.

England is no longer a foe, and is certainly one of our greatest allies. Today, we hardly know who our foes are, and if they are living in Chicago, in the Sudan, or in the Khyber Pass.

And while the rebel flag of the Confederacy doesn't wave over North Hills, the banner of secession is being waved by activists who wish to break up the City of Los Angeles.

Quite simply – there has never been a greater need for strong leadership on the issues that affect our nation at the international, national, state, and local levels.

While I've certainly got a job to do each day, as graduates, you have a job as well.

You've still got sometime to make up your mind, but in your years here at Monroe, I hope you've got a sense of what makes you tick – what makes you want to go beyond writing the research paper or doing what you need to do for school and do independent study. Do you want to change government from the inside as an elected official, a staff member, or an attorney? Or do you want to change government from the outside as a journalist, pointing out the flaws of government and then, perhaps in a daily column, proposing solutions?

If law is your forté, then you have a wide range of possibilities – from representing defendants to prosecuting them, from arresting criminals as a law enforcement officer, to trying them as a judge. Or maybe the world of patents and copyrights in today's information age is what you would like to pursue.

And, of course, I would urge any of you who would like to teach – to inspire future generations, and to pass down the legacy of learning that you have earned today to the leaders of tomorrow, please pursue this noble and distinguished career.

And for a moment, I'd like to thank the teachers, the staff, and the administrators here at Monroe for dedicating their professional careers to education and to making Monroe one of our region's top educational institutions...

Whatever career path or higher education path you choose, you will have made a difference in someone's life. And believe me, you don't have to be President of the United States or President of the City Council to do so.

You can make a difference in your community by volunteering at a youth recreation center or by helping to paint out graffiti.

You can make a difference in the City you live in by being an active participant in government – and if you have new ideas or strategies on how to keep the San Fernando Valley from seceding, please see me after today's ceremony.

You can make a difference in your home State of California – first and foremost, by registering to vote the day of your 18th birthday – and yes, by paying your taxes, and also by acknowledging and understanding our great state's network of parks, of coastal beaches, and our state's peerless water system that provides drinking water, farm irrigation, and industrial water to more than 30 million Californians each and every day.

You can make a difference in this great nation we live in by developing or enforcing sound environmental policies that preserve our natural environment while at the same time empowering businesses to develop green technologies to sustain economic development without depleting our resources.

And you can make a difference in our world by taking the opportunity to travel, to learn another language, and to familiarize yourself with the history of different cultures and different nationalities – even if you only begin this process by following the World Cup that's currently underway.

I know we've got a few more items in the program this warm afternoon, so I don't want to keep you much longer.

Today, you begin a journey – a journey that will not end with college graduation, that won't end with your first job, that won't end with your second or third job, or when you choose to start a family. The science fiction author Douglas Adams once wrote, "I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be."

Although I may have intended to be a mechanical engineer, I know I ended up in the right place – in public service.

Whatever you do, and whatever you pursue, I know that you also will wind up where you intend to be, and where you will be able to contribute your skills and talents to society...and to the world.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak before you today, and congratulations graduates!

###