I am so honored to have this opportunity to speak to the 2023 graduates of the Ford Dorsey Master’s in International Policy Program at the Freeman Spogli Institute of Stanford University. I thank the Director and my friend, Dr. Frank Fukuyama, for this invitation to greet you all. It’s an honor to be here, along with my colleagues Mike McFaul, with whom I’ve worked for many years, and Chonira Aturupane.

Most of all, I am happy to stand before you, the parents, friends and relatives of these students and say to you what a magnificent bunch they are. “Full of spit and vinegar,” my Ohio relations would say, and I have to agree with them: these young people take risks, push themselves, speak up, and are never afraid of new ideas and new challenges. In short, they are ready for whatever joy ride the 21st century will take them on. It has been a privilege for me to know them. Thank you for what you have done to bring them up to this point.

On many graduation podiums across the country this spring, Chat GPT, generative artificial intelligence, is making an appearance—I hope not writing the speeches (certainly not mine!), but figuring in the discussion.

I will comment briefly too, recollecting the words of American author William Faulkner when he made his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail…because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.” Whether you embrace “soul” in a religious sense, or in a cultural way—I am thinking about soul music—the idea is that we have a unique human capacity to feel and to do.

In a way, we are talking nowadays about our long-term endurance in the face of an onslaught of new technologies that threaten, or appear to threaten, to sap our human agency, to remove the essence of the creative force that
leads to new beauty in music, art, theater, film, writing and dance. To halt the human insight and ingenuity that lead to new discoveries in science and innovation in technology. Perhaps to muffle the comfort and peace that come from stable and secure human interactions—in the family, among friends and lovers, among colleagues in the workplace. Even, perhaps, to disturb everyday kindness among strangers.

- As I’ve talked with my own Stanford students, including some of you in MIP, about the advent of generative AI and how it will affect your lives, I’ve been heartened by the determination you have shown, every one of you, to sustain your individual creativity and think of ChatGPT and more advanced tools, as they arrive on the scene, as just that—tools. You are determined to endure as human beings with agency to create, to innovate, to love and to be loved.

- I don’t know if this message has any special importance, coming as it does from the heart of Silicon Valley where so many of these trends developed in the first place. I can tell you that it does have special meaning for me, as your teacher: the first generation to have generative AI thrust upon you is ready to take it up as a tool, but not allow it to usurp your essential humanity.

- Now, any good commencement speech must contain some advice, right? I cannot resist! I used to quote Calvin Coolidge and his devotion to persistence: “Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence,” he said. “Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts.”

- But then I got to thinking: one of the great things about America is our willingness to admit it when things are going wrong and to abandon failure. Certainly that’s been the second law of Silicon Valley, after “move fast and break things”: if you fail, get over it, try again. So I’m going to leave Calvin Coolidge behind this year.

- But I won’t leave judicious risk-taking behind: that’s the essence of a successful life. I liked the May 28 interview in the Financial Times of Jeremy Fleming, the head of GCHQ in London: that’s the UK’s spy agency, storied home of James Bond. Fleming talked about his career as a series of sliding doors—when they opened, something unexpected was on the other side, and he always stepped through. I think he pulled the image from the 1998 film with Gwyneth Paltrow, which doesn’t exactly match his life, but I got it: when the risks presented themselves, he embraced them.
• I have to say I took a risk to become the Deputy Secretary General of NATO in 2016. I’d made my career working on nuclear weapons policy and suddenly, I was thrown into an organization largely devoted to conventional defense with—at the time—28 allied members, some of whom I knew very little about. One of the newest members, for example, was Albania, a Balkan nation that I certainly did not know much about. It was a steep learning curve, but I am so glad I took on the challenge. At 65 years of age, it forced me to learn and grow.
• Of course, you will not always have good jobs thrust at you; sometimes you’ll have to make your own rain, work hard to find the next step on your path. All I’m saying is, when something comes along that takes you out of your comfort zone, take a hard look at it. If the job forces you to learn and grow, it’s a risk worth taking.
• My second piece of advice comes Ambassador Linton Brooks. He was the chief negotiator of the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in the 1990-91 period, when I worked for him as a very young and very green member of his delegation in Geneva.
• Linton once told me, when we were pulling all-nighters during the negotiations, that “a shower is worth four hours of sleep.” He’s right: you’ve probably noticed this effect yourself, during exam time, but never thought about it. I just wouldn’t try what my friend, a real joker, said to me: take two showers to equal eight hours, then you won’t have to sleep at all.
• My third piece of advice comes from Dr. Joseph Coates, who was my professor in graduate school. I put up my hand in class one night and when he called on me, I started by saying, “Well, I don’t know anything about this but…” Joe interrupted me and said, “Stop right there! Never apologize! Your thoughts and insights are just as good as anybody else’s. Say what you have to say with confidence.”
• I don’t know about you, ladies, but this was a particular problem I had when I was in my twenties. It took me a while to rid myself of the habit of apologizing, but it’s been worth it. Diving in without apology gives you the edge in gathering everybody’s attention. So never apologize for your ideas! That goes, of course, for you guys, too.
• For my last piece of advice I will return to the topic with which I began. It’s especially for you, the first generation to have generative AI thrust upon you. Remember always that it is the joy of creation that makes us special,
the surge of inspiration that kicks in when we’re on a roll, making a tune or a poem or a dance, or even writing a capstone project.

- So although it may seem easier some days just to put the question into the chat, start thinking instead. It’s what makes us human.
- I will close with my great thanks and appreciation for everything you have given me in the past year. I have learned so much from you! And I can tell you, I think you have what it takes to find yourselves a good pathway through life. Good luck and Godspeed.