Transcript of the Tom Brokaw Lecture 2012

Michael Hemesath: Good evening and welcome. I am Michael Hemesath, president of St. John’s University. I welcome you to campus tonight and to Collegeville this evening for the 6th annual Eugene McCarthy lecture on Conscience and Courage in Public Life. We are privileged to have with us this evening, President MaryAnn Baenninger of the College of Saint Benedict, Abbot John Klassen, representing the monastic community at St John’s and former congressman from this area, Alec Olson. Also joining us this evening are Senator Eugene McCarthy’s daughter Ellen McCarthy, his son Michael McCarthy, as well as the senator’s sister-in-law Muriel McCarthy, who happens to be celebrating a birthday I have heard some rumor about, as well as other McCarthy family members and friends. Earlier this evening, two-term governor from North Dakota, Governor George Sinner from the St. John’s class of 1950 and Susan Lynch Vento, educator, advocate and lobbyist from the St Ben’s class of 1976, were recognized by the St. Ben’s and St. John’s Politics and Public Policy Alumni Chapter as the 2012 recipients of the McCarthy Distinguished Public Service Award. George was not able to be with us this evening, but his wife Jane is with us, so will Jane and Susan Vento please stand to be recognized?

(Applause)

Eugene McCarthy was a special person for many reasons. For starters, he graduated from St. John’s with top academic honors at the age of 19. He also excelled at baseball and hockey while he was a student at St John’s. Gene was a faculty member here. He was a member of the monastic community for a short period of time, and he would visit this campus and community often during his days in Congress and the Senate and later as a presidential candidate. We are particularly grateful to Katharine and Dan Whalen for endowing the Eugene J. McCarthy Center for Public Policy and Civic Engagement at St. John’s. Through the senator’s programs, internships and other student opportunities, we carry on Senator McCarthy’s commitment to the common good and to civic engagement. While the Whalens were unable to be with us this evening, please join me in acknowledging their generous support.

(Applause)

It is no accident that this lecture honoring Senator McCarthy was chosen to take place on September 11. As you know, on this date eleven years ago, terrorists launched a series of suicide attacks against our nation. I invite you to join me now for a moment of silent prayer and remembrance as we pay tribute to those nearly three thousand individuals who were murdered in these attacks, including St. John’s University alumnus Tom Burnett, class of 1985, who was one of the heroes on United Flight 93, that thwarted the terrorist attack against our nation’s capitol. Let’s bow our heads please. (Silence) Amen. Thank you. I would now like to introduce Dr. Matt Lindstrom, the Edward L. Henry professor of political science and the director of the McCarthy Center.

(Applause)

Matt Lindstrom: Good evening. Thank you all for coming tonight. We are in for a very interesting evening, don’t you think? Those of you in the overflow seating in the Pellegrene Auditorium, those of you may be watching in Brother Willie’s Pub or the rest of you around the world watching online where we’re streaming this throughout the world: welcome. Just a couple quick items of business before we carry on. One thing is, make sure the kneelers are down because the speakers need to work, so hopefully you took care of that. After the address there will be some time for audience questions. We have provided two microphones here. I ask just a couple things, one is that you ask a brief question, emphasis on the “brief” and the “question”, and also just speak into the microphone so we can hear it up here. I’m not sure how well we can hear up here. So make sure it’s loud enough. Following the question and answer, there will be a book signing and reception in the Great Hall right across the way here. You’re all welcome to attend. The sixth annual McCarthy lectureship carries Senator Gene McCarthy’s deep commitment to the ideals and principles of democratic self-government. It seeks to inspire a new generation of young people to pursue fresh ideas to challenge the status quo and to affect positive change in their community and to lead with honesty, integrity and courage. Previous McCarthy lecturers E.J. Dionne, Mark Shields, Julian Bond, Senators Chuck Hagel and Amy Klobuchar all provided their own variations on tonight’s theme: conscience and courage in public life. We thank you, Mr. Brokaw, for returning to the heartland and joining us tonight as our 6th annual lecturer. Let me also add that Mr. Brokaw has not taken a dime for his time here today, not a nickel or a dime.

(Applause)

In lieu of an honorarium, St. John’s University will be making a contribution to the Minnesota Military Appreciation Fund. And that was Mr. Brokaw’s idea; we appreciate that. I would now like to introduce Isaac Meyer, a senior political science major from Breckenridge, Minnesota. Isaac is an active student, academically as well as civically. He frequently participates in the various McCarthy Center events, serves as a volunteer St. John’s EMT, and he was selected as a McCarthy Center John Brandl scholar, a Bonner leader at St. Ben’s- St. John’s, and he’s also been a St. Ben’s Marie and Robert Jackson fellow. He’s won just about every award and honor we have here, I think so far. Nonetheless, I know he’s thrilled to introduce our distinguished guest. So Isaac, thank you for introducing Mr. Brokaw.

(Applause)

Isaac Meyer: Thank you, Professor Lindstrom. It’s an honor. Tonight I am pleased to welcome and introduce Tom Brokaw as our 6th annual Eugene J. McCarthy lecturer. Mr. Brokaw is one of America’s most well-known and respected journalists. He’s been a regular fixture in the homes of millions of Americans, with a journalistic career covering over four decades. Mr. Brokaw has seen and shared the events which have shaped American life and the world we know today. Those of you who are older than I will recognize Tom from his long career as a broadcaster and an author. Those of you my age will recognize Tom from being on the Daily Show last week. Like myself, Tom Brokaw studied political science, a distinguished alumnus from the University of South Dakota. But before that, Tom was a student at the University of Iowa, and like many of us, he studied, as he once put it, “beer and coeds.” After graduation, he went on to work in broadcasting in Omaha and Atlanta before accepting a position with NBC in LA in 1966. He stayed with NBC for 44 years and became a correspondent and eventually the anchor of NBC’s Nightly News, a role he filled for 22 years with enormous success. Today we live in an America that is distinctly different from the America that Mr. Brokaw experienced as a young man growing up in South Dakota, and which he began reporting on almost half a century ago. The media exerts enormous influence on the dialogue that occurs in American life. We have a million and one sources to cater to our tastes, not all of them as good as the last, and many simply divisive. Our nation has never felt so partisan, and our country’s preeminence is, in many minds, precarious.

The American landscape has changed greatly in the last 50 years, from the time of Eugene McCarthy. Mr. Brokaw is no stranger to this lecture’s namesake. In *Boom!*, talking about the 60’s, Brokaw recounts an evening dinner with the senator: “He was one of our political heroes. He was our idea of exactly what a senator should be. A sophisticated intellectual. Sardonically witty. The kind who would not only notice the books on the shelves, but could mock their titles.” Despite the change in American discourse, Mr. Brokaw has remained as engaged as ever in making sense of the modern world and telling us about our nation. Mr. Brokaw began his latest book, *The Times of Our Lives*, saying, “I believe it is time for an American conversation about legacy and destiny. There are few people as equipped as Mr. Brokaw to begin that conversation, one so fitting of Eugene McCarthy’s ideals. Mr. Brokaw, we are honored to host you at the Eugene J. McCarthy Center for Public Policy and Civic Engagement at St. John’s University. My fellow students, faculty, monastics, staff, alumni, and friends of St. Ben’s and St. John’s community, would you please help me welcome this year’s Eugene J. McCarthy lecturer, Mr. Tom Brokaw.

(Applause)

Tom Brokaw: Thank you. Thank you very much. (Applause) Thank you. Thank you. (Applause) Gosh I hope you feel that way at the end of my remarks as well here this evening. Let me say at the outset in the most heartfelt possible way, that as a child of the great plains, nearby prairie state of South Dakota, who spent a fair amount of his childhood here in Minnesota, as a matter of fact, when my father was working construction when I first began life and later as a camp counselor in southwestern Minnesota, I always feel that I’m back home when I come here. And then when I come to this magnificent setting and this great institution, it renews my pride in this region and the kind of steady-as-she-goes quality that all of you bring to your lives on a daily basis in your community, in your family, in your business and in your faith. So I daresay at the outset that it is a great and rare privilege for me to be with you here this evening and to share what I hope will be a conversation about this country, about where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we may be going.

Now you may have noticed that I am being judged while I am here tonight. I have a jury on my left. But it’s this jury that I’m worried about over here. Because I have four former boyhood friends who have come here for this occasion. Three of them went to St. John’s college, I’m going to ask them to stand: Bill Walsh of Deadwood, South Dakota, Jim Collier of Yankton, Jerry Donohoe of Yankton and Dr. Ken Herfkins, who now lives in the state of Missouri. I introduce them to you (Applause) because later they may have some commentary, not just on what I have to say here tonight, but on my earlier life. I’m here to tell you not to believe a word that they have to say. They are actually on route, three of them, to their high school reunion in Yankton, 55 years after they graduated. I have only one observation about what they can expect. On Saturday morning, having left here and gone back to be reunited with their classmates for several days in Yankton, on Saturday morning, at Sacred Heart Church, the line is going to be very long at the confession booth. I want everyone to be aware.

It’s actually a great relief to come to St. John’s. It occurred to me earlier today that if I had accepted a speaking engagement at St. Thomas I would have to use shorter words and speak more slowly (applause). But I come here not under false pretensions. As my pals will be the first to tell you, I arrived in Yankton at the age of 15 as a sophomore, had what even by those standards could be described as a reasonably successful high school career, emerged as kind of a whiz kid and then went immediately off the tracks, pretty seriously, for a couple of years, as a matter of fact. I met the woman to whom I have now been married for a half century my sophomore year in high school (applause). You know it always elicits that kind of applause and my temptation is always to say ‘and it’s been hell every day for those fifty years’. But in fact it’s been quite the contrary.

It’s been one of the great love affairs and one of the great adventures that anyone can possibly understand, but it didn’t start off that way. We were high school pals- she was a cheerleader, and I was kind of a jock. We were class officers; we had the leads in the play. She became Miss South Dakota and graduated with honors from the University of South Dakota. And then I, as I said, I went off the rails for a couple of years and actually dropped out of college at one point, but by then I was kind of interested in her and I let her know that I was coming back to the university, wanted to see her that weekend, and she wrote me a devastating note, saying, “Don’t call, don’t bother to show up, I don’t understand what’s going with you, you seem to be going nowhere.” It was a real turn-around in my life. So I got my act together. I got a full-time job nearby, community university, got my grades up, and I was doing pretty well, and she came to see me one day. And sat in the library and said, “I was out of line. I kind of overreached when I wrote that harsh note. And I said, “No actually, Meredith, it was the right thing for you to do.” And six months later she proposed to me. True story. I was a little suspicious; I thought maybe she was marrying me for my money.

After all I was making 75 dollars a week, had 1,000 dollars in college debts, and I had a 1953 Ford, mostly maroon but with one white fender because I cracked up the other one. We have in our family a saying that we’re all very fond of; we read it in the New York Times social page a few years ago. A minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts was marrying a couple and said what seems to me to be the quintessential line about marriage. “In a sense,” he said, “the person we marry is someone about whom we have a magnificent hunch.” Well Meredith just didn’t have a hunch; she was playing a long shot. I had a surer thing. And I got out of school, and we began our life in Omaha and Atlanta and Los Angeles. We’ve traveled the world; we’ve been on every continent. Things have worked out very well for us.

But when I was at the University of South Dakota making my comeback, I was under the tutelage of a remarkable political science professor by the name of Bill Farber who raised generations of political science students who became governors and senators and members of the fed and assistant secretaries of defense and really became successful in so many ways, and I was one of his prize projects. But he was always realistic about it when I got to a certain stage in life, began to get honorary degrees. Washington University in St. Louis called and said, “We’re so pleased to be giving an honorary degree to Tom Brokaw, who was one of your students. Could you tell us something about his undergraduate years at the university. And Bill without hesitation said, “Well to be perfectly frank, we thought the degree that we gave him was an honorary degree.” I tell you all that to give you some kind of context about who appears before you here tonight.

But let me begin with a tribute to my friend Ellen McCarthy who persuaded me to come and do this. Ellen and I met in 1968 when her father was running for the presidential nomination. Here’s how I met her: she was staying with friends of ours. He was the chairman of the McCarthy campaign in California, and I walked into her house and this beautiful young woman was having her hair done because she had a date that night to the academy awards with this little-known actor who was suddenly a big star by the name of Dusty Hoffman. Dustin Hoffman. And then when we moved to Washington we renewed our friendship. And I daresay this is the kind of resolution that all longstanding friends should have. Ellen and I talked about what I should touch on here this evening: about courage and compassion in public life.

And her father in 1968 especially was the apotheosis of that. I actually had Sunday dinner with him late in 1967 at a friend’s house in California. I had admired him from afar. He was a senator from Minnesota. I had grown up in South Dakota, but I liked his politics. I liked his eloquence and his intellectual approach to the issues of the day. But it was clear how at the end of that Sunday dinner, how deeply unhappy he was with the conduct of the war in Vietnam and business as usual in Washington, and he was determined to take it on in some fashion. And most of you know the story. Students from across America went “clean for Gene.” They cut their hair and cleaned up their wardrobes and went to New Hampshire. And although he didn’t defeat Lyndon Johnson, he drove him out of the race, and he changed American politics, and it was the beginning really of a party and a populace taking charge of the decisions in this country from the ground up. There is no more critical decision than going to war and spending America’s most precious resources: its blood and treasure. And Gene McCarthy, in a way that really endures to this day, led that charge and forced this country to confront those great issues. And then he was joined in the Democratic race by Bobby Kennedy, and they began to contest with each other, first in Nebraska and then across the country in the spring of 1968, a year in which Dr. King was assassinated, a year in which 16 thousand American troops died in Vietnam, a year in which Lyndon Johnson, the sitting president, America’s quintessential politician, walked away from the presidency because he couldn’t bear the effect that he was having on the party.

(Interruption because of technical difficulties)

Everybody needs a microphone at one time or another...I’m happy to be back here at this podium..at any rate we’ll stay here and I’ll continue the narrative of that year. I can remember it as if it were yesterday: this pitched contest between these two robust, passionate public servants. Gene McCarthy of Minnesota, Bobby Kennedy of Massachusetts; they could not have been more unalike except in their ancestry and in their faith. And it was good for the country in so many ways. Gene was as cool as a Minnesota winter. I remember having a broadcast in Lost Angeles that was a mandatory stop for candidates in those days. It was kind of a meet the press of California. And Gene walked in with his friend Robert Lowell and one other aid: no papers, no preparation, and sat down. Could not have been more articulate, more in command of the facts and of what he wanted to say. He left and Bobby Kennedy came in, in a flurry of aids and a lot of other people, an aid handing him I remember a tunafish sandwich on a paper plate going through briefing papers, his sleeves rolled up, and he sat down. And each in their own way engaged the people of California and by extension the people of America in the critical issues of our day. That is the world in which I grew up as a political correspondent, and it wasn’t confined just to those two men.

I know that you’ve had Julian Bond here as your speaker. I was working in Atlanta when he was denied his seat in the Atlanta assembly, the Georgia legislature, because of a statement put out by John Lewis, the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Julian was exactly my age. I was in the capital when he was contesting the decision not to seat him. And I am here to tell you that I was afraid that he would be shot at any moment. The rednecks were hanging from the rafters in the Georgia capital. There was cheering and booing. The state police could barely keep control of the security, and this young man, my age, an African American, walked down through the corridors flanked by FBI agents and federal marshals, and I said to him later, “I was terrified, and yet you were so cool.” And he said, “Brother Brokaw, I was so cool that I went down to this holding room and broke out in hives from my neck all the way to the bottom of my feet.” It was another example of compassion and courage.

I remember not just democrats, the likes of Hubert Humphrey, who is from my home state and became a great champ of the liberal cause here in Minnesota or Orville Freeman or Fritz Mondale or Governor Hughes in nearby Iowa, Gaylord Nelson, George McGovern in South Dakota. I remember Senator Tiede of New York and Jacob Javits and Barry Goldwater, who gave birth to the modern conservative movement, was a man who always had a place in his heart for the common man. And he could talk across the aisle to any of his colleagues who didn’t necessarily share his ideology but shared his patriotism. That was the world in which I began my political reporting career, and the world that I thought would be there forever. Alas, it is no longer the case. It was best exemplified, this current climate, for me about three years ago when I was on capitol hill in one of the Senate caucus rooms and two bright young men came up to me. You would recognize the types: dressed in blue suits, red ties, white shirts and they said, “Mr. Brokaw, we want to talk to you about the old days,” and I think that they meant 1998, I’m not sure. And I said, “well what do you want to know?” and one of them said to me, “I’m a Democrat, he’s a Republican. He works for a Republican congressman; I work for a Democratic congressman. He’s my very best friend and always will be. We go to Georgetown every night, and we argue politics until 2 o’ clock in the morning, and then come back to the offices the next day and do the jobs that are expected of us. His boss won’t talk to my boss. My boss won’t talk to his boss. Was it always like that? And I said, with a note of resignation, “No it was not.”

Alas we have allowed ourselves to become deeply, deeply divided within the beltway of Washington: ideologically, culturally and otherwise, to such a degree that you can’t even acknowledge the other side in tempered or reasonable tones. There are no relationships that reach across aisle anymore. That, I would suggest to you, is a prescription for retreat, not for advancing the great cause of this immigrant nation. There is a great debate these days about American exceptionalism: who believes in it and who has doubt. I have no doubts. Look at my life: where I was raised and how. What I was able to do with my life, my family and friends, including those that are here tonight and the successes that they have enjoyed. In fact, the country has moved forward in so many areas. And I think during this election year it’s important for all of us to pause for a moment and reflect on our experiences and to make a commitment individually and collectively that we somehow step back into the arena again.

Let me suggest a place to begin. I wrote a book called *The Time of Our Lives*. It came out on hardback last year; it’s out in paperback now. I’ve been all over television talking about it. I was even on with Sean Hannity the other night, who loved it. And so did Charlie Rose. How’s that for a spectrum. I was on David Letterman and John Stewart. And I find very little disagreement with the broad premise of the book. And that book has caused me to think about my own lifetime and the enduring lessons of it.

Here is a simple and, I believe, profound truth. I was born in 1940, and shortly after I was born what happened in America was that there was a huge idea that unified the country not a series of small ideas that divided the country. That huge idea was we had to go to war. We’d been attacked by the Japanese and Hitler declared war upon us. In 1938 we were the 16th military power in the war, behind even Poland. Dwight Eisenhower was still a colonel; he had not seen a shot fired in combat or in anger. But this country mobilized overnight. My father built airports here and ammunitions stations here in Minnesota. Our family moved to an army base in southwestern South Dakota. They stopped producing civilian vehicles and farm equipment so they could turn out new weapons and heavy duty trucks and tanks and armored vehicles. The Boeing plant in Wichita: the machinist would get rough sketches from the designers of new kinds of aircraft overnight and hand tool them the next day, the parts that were needed, to deliver weapons to distant places. And all across America, people flooded the recruiting stations and the draft offices to sign up and to go into uniform. Farmers grew more food so that the troops would have what they needed. One of my favorite stories is about a man who was a bellman in Rochester, Minnesota at a hotel. His family were poor dairy farmers. Nine months after the war broke out he was piloting a four engine bomber on combat runs. That’s what happened during the war and in a span of time that no one could have anticipated, that war was won and the world was saved from the ravages of Adolf Hitler and his nationalism and his Nazi, poisonous philosophy of life.

And then something remarkable happened. Before the war came to a final conclusion and the Congress of the United States in this country was still in debt, the war was not yet surely going to be concluded on our terms. The Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, voted for something called the G.I. bill. Veterans who were returning from that war would have the opportunity for higher education: to go to college or to technical training. Now remember, so many of them had come out of the Great Depression. I really believe that that formed their character. They had grown up with the idea of deprivation and sacrifice and taking it a day at a time and being mission-oriented. And now when the war ends, even though we’re deep in debt, Congress has signed a bill that allows people to go to college and get a degree and become engineers and architects and doctors and lawyers and educators , and they in turn gave us new industry, new science, new art. They got married in record numbers. They spread out across the country in different ways; they built the southwest and the far west and the state of Florida. And they never whined and they never whimpered. They simply wanted to advance the cause of this country and catch up on a life of which two or three years had been taken from them. And as so many of them said to me, “I had to live the life for my buddy who didn’t make it back.” Or they would say to me “God, I remember what it was like when I first joined the army or the navy or the army air corps. I had never had a breakfast like that before. I got my first new pair of trousers or new pair of boots. I didn’t want my children to go through that kind of an experience.” A big idea that unified America: the GI bill.

And when Dwight Eisenhower hung up his general stars and ran for office he had a big idea: we’re going to connect this country through the interstate highway system, and we’re going to have large and effective public works projects. That was the next stage of my life. I grew up in one of them in south-central South Dakota, a place called Fort Randall, and I remember at the age of seven, my father taking me out to a Missouri bluff and saying, “They’re going to build a dam across the river here. It’s going to be the largest of its type in the world,” and I simply did not believe him. And 18 months later, they had put down an entire town to house the workers who flooded in from across America. And they built that dam and they built Oahe and the big dam, and they transformed the prairie states with the lakes and the hydroelectricity and the flood control that came out of it.

John Kennedy was elected President of the United States and we all remember him saying, “Ask not what your government can do for you but what you can do for your government.” And then he gave us a challenge, a big idea that unified us: we’re going to go to the moon and put a man there. And it unleashed this extraordinary reservoir of science and technology in America and gave birth to companies across America that are now some of the goliaths of our scientific and technological landscape. At the same time, African Americans were coming back from the war having sacrificed under the most brutal kinds of conditions and said, “This shall not stand. We demand now all the opportunities of citizenship that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution assures us that we should have.” And a young preacher, originally from Atlanta but residing that time in Alabama, gave voice. Gave voice to their complaints and their concerns, but he most of all gave voice to the conscience of this country collectively because he believed in the principals of nonviolence and the rule of law. He didn’t confront the American system with shotguns and rifles, with dynamite and explosives. He confronted it with an ever larger following on a daily basis of young men and women and older ones as well who said simply, “We shall overcome.” A big idea that saved this country from the ravages of racism, from the pernicious division in America along racial lines, and we should all be grateful for that very big idea that gave us the civil rights movement.

And then America moved on. American moved on to the 1960’s and Gene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy and the Berrigan brothers and those who risked their lives and forced the country to confront how decisions are made about going to war and how we all fit together in some fashion. It was a very uneven big idea, but out of that idea in the 60’s grew gender equality. I honestly believe that the 21st century will be the century of women. You see it almost every day now. Look at the Olympics. The real stars of the American Olympic team were the women. More than half the Ivy League presidents now are women. More than half the enrollment in colleges of law and medicine are women. The new CEO of the white male bastion IBM: a woman. It’s happening across America and that grew out of the 1960’s with Title IX and the recognition that women have equal footing with men in every conceivable place of the American firmament.

In 1968, at the end of that tumultuous year, Richard Nixon was elected president. Now he had some very bad ideas, there’s no question about that, and he divided this country in a way that it took us a while to heal our wounds. But he did have the strategic vision of a big idea of opening relations with China at a time when that country was a blank spot on the map that might as well have been labeled “beyond here serpents lie.” And our relationship with China today, although imperfect, is far better now because of that early opening.

Along came Ronald Reagan out of California, a man who was first dismissed as just an actor, turned out to be an uncanny politician. Trained first of all as a labor negotiator for the Screen Actor’s Guild and two terms as governor of California dealing with a very smart and contentious California legislature and with his Vice President George Bush, who deserves equal credit, because what happened transcended their administrations. They managed to confront the Soviet Union in such a way, persistently and yet peacefully, that the Soviet Union had no choice, ultimately led by Mikhail Gorbachev, but to dismantle itself, and not a shot was fired. Many of us in this room lived with a threat of nuclear terror every day, hiding beneath our desks, looking at bomb shelters and seeing those bomb shelter signs, and that great confrontation of the 20th century came to a conclusion peacefully. I was at the Berlin Wall the night it came down. I had the good fortune of being the only one there with a satellite and the only correspondent from NBC with live coverage. And as I stood there, I thought nothing could exceed what I went through in 1968, and yet here we are again: another extraordinary punctuation mark in American history. And the joyfulness of seeing the students from the West climbing atop the wall and bringing the students from the East up with them, and then together beginning to dismantle that wall: it was more than symbolic. It was historic in the grandest possible terms. And by the way, to tell you how times change: one of the East German students, actually two of them, who walked across once the gates were open was Angela Merkel who is now the German chancellor, the most powerful woman in Europe and probably the most visionary of the leaders on that continent. That’s how swiftly history changes fate and fortune, not just for individuals, but for all of us.

And later I moderated a panel before an audience much like this one in Atlanta: Mikhail Gorbachev, who was in charge in Moscow at the time, George H.W. Bush, who was the president of the United States at the time, and Helmut Kohl, who was the chancellor of West Germany. Kohl, a large bear of a man, got very emotional as he looked at the two of them and he said to Gorbachev, “You did not send the tanks and lives were spared, and I am grateful for that.” And he said to President Bush, “And you stood with me with the idea of a unified Germany when Margaret Thatcher and others said ‘We cannot let that country after two world wars in the twentieth century be united again.’” But it is united again: a big idea that unified this country as well.

And not too long after that, in garages across Silicon Valley and New Mexico and Seattle, Washington, a group of young men primarily, the kinds of guys that used to be president of the chess club, the kinds of guys you wanted to sit next to in trig, the kinds of guys who wore pocket protectors and taped their glasses, were changing the world with technology the likes of which we are still to completely realize. Information technology, mobile computers now reduced to simple instruments that we carry around in our breast pocket and will wear on our wrists as wrist bands. That was invented here. It was a huge idea, and it is changing the world for the better. How we communicate with each other. How we retrieve information and share medical advances, how we are in touch with one another when something happens so we all have access to it. And what’s the mantra of Silicon Valley? Whatever they work on, whatever the new app is, it has to be disruptive. Disruptive means we’re not going to do things in a conventional way. Those of you in this room, when you look back just on your immediate past, think about how swiftly you have changed your personal habits, about how you make a telephone call or how you communicate with someone, how you share pictures with one another. It’s disruptive.

So here’s my concluding thought: I think as a political culture, America, in the first third of the 21st century, has to from the ground up begin to think about being disruptive with compassion and with courage. And here’s a thought I have about how we can achieve those twin goals. I spent a lot of time in the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. I knew David Petraeus when he only had two stars. I was embedded with him in Mosul and moved through those villages with his troops and watched their extraordinary efficiency as military warriors as they secured areas and took on the bad guys. And then I watched them in their Kevlar vests and their goggles and their helmets try to win the hearts and the minds of the villagers. And as David and I would talk about it, it was often incompatible. He used to say, “Money is ammo; I’m going to spread money around and try to buy their hearts and minds,” but there’s a limit to that obviously. I was embedded with Special Forces in an hour and a half helicopter ride up north of Kandahar in real hostile country in the middle of nowhere. We were at a fire base that was probably forty yards across and sixty yards long built in a reinforced concrete triangle so there were no corners for the bad guys to get around. 12-man special forces team backed up by infantry for the first division doing their security, they were out every night with night scope weapons taking down the bad guys, interceding infiltration into that area. And then at day break, we would go with our striker vehicles or Humvees into the villages because their roads are only two tracks. If we were on them the farmers would have to get off to the side- tough to win hearts and minds that way- and get to these kind of clay villages where they still live in an 18th century fashion and say, “We’re here to help.” And again, the villagers would look at them very skeptically. This is a country that has been at war in one form or another for two thousand years. And I came away from those experiences thinking, we’ve got to alter the formulation.

Let me begin with specifics and then give you the underlying moral reason we have to change. The specifics are that we have to develop diplomatic Special Forces, an entirely new approach to putting the face of America out there in those villages. The underlying reason for that is that we ask less than one percent of our population, many of them from working class neighborhoods, all of them volunteers, to take all the wounds, take all the deaths, all the emotional trauma that goes with war, and nothing, *nothing* is asked for the rest of us. We have, in the course of these two long wars, paid not one additional penny in taxes to pay for them. If we didn’t have somebody involved, we didn’t even have to think about them. They come home in body bags at Dover in Delaware in the middle of the night. At V.A. hospitals the wards are filled with men and women with missing limbs and head trauma that won’t go away once the war ends. In small towns across America including my hometown and their home town of Yankton where a national guard unit went over and got hit hard, Corey Briest was declared dead three different times, but he’s come back and the community built a house for him, and he’s making remarkable advances in his physiology and in his emotional well-being and so is his family, but guess what? To one degree or another, he’ll belong to Yankton the rest of his life because he’s a hundred miles away from a V.A. hospital, and when he gets there, the wards are often too crowded or the paperwork has not been done correctly. It is not just unjust to ask less than one percent of our population to go to war, it is immoral. And we have to change that. And one of the ways that we can change that is to raise the idea of public service in America so as so many of us when we were eighteen knew that we would have to report to the draft board, we’ll now think proactively about serving our country and advancing our individual interests as well.

Here’s the Brokaw idea: establish six public service academies across America. Do them at land grant schools because they’re especially skilled in the mechanics, agriculture, engineering, the hard sciences that are functional in society and make them public-private academies. Develop the John Deere Fellows, for example, in botany and agronomy but also in the operating of big modern combines, experts in drip irrigation in arid lands. Have the Johnson and Johnson or the Siemens Fellow or the G.E. Fellows in medicine, physicians doing post grad work or getting special skills in infectious diseases in sub-Saharan Africa or in this country. Have the Caterpillar Fellows training engineers who know how to operate the big equipment but also experts in, for example, building dikes in New Orleans. The opportunities are limitless it seems to me.

Now these young men and women who volunteer for these diplomatic Special Forces who pass the grade at these special service academies get assigned either domestically or internationally for a period of say 3-4 years. Then they come home to the home office. And at the home office they have 2 years to prove themselves as a worthy employee of the company that has underwritten their experience. Think of what the company is getting. They’re getting somebody who probably has learned a native language, who understands the politics and culture in foreign lands, and as we become ever more every day a global economy, think about the value those young diplomatic Special Forces will have to those companies, and it will knit together the public and private sectors of this country which are too much at war at this moment. And they can learn from one another.

I’ve been reading an early biography of Winston Churchill called *The Young Titan* about his early days in politics. We mostly know Churchill as the hero of WWII, but before he was that, he was a great heroic figure in England because at the very tender age in his 20’s, he had escaped from a prisoner of war camp in South Africa, made a daring run across South Africa, came back and lectured about it. He always had the gift of language, and he ran for office first as a Tory and then he became a Liberal. And he was constantly trying to balance what his instincts were between being a conservative and being a liberal, and as he looked around England, he began to realize that at the turn of the 21st century, there were so many social needs that were not being addressed. It was very much a class society, and the parliament was dominated by the aristocrats and the industrialists. And he came to the conclusion that, and this is the simple truth, there are some things that government must do, not because government does them well, but because if government doesn’t do them, no one else will. And public service academies, with a public-private axis, it seems to me, can strike that balance in the appropriate way as we go in to the 21st century and compete against China and Brazil, against Russia, against India.

Moreover, it’s an important signal to a generation coming of age more highly educated than any generation before it, going to live longer and live a different quality of life physically. But how do you connect them to the country that in effect harbors them? This immigrant nation that has always been at its best when it’s more than the sum of its parts. How do you wean them away from the idea that life is more than having a lot of friends on Facebook or a record number of tweets in any 24 hours? Now I happen to believe strongly in this technology, I like it as much as anyone, but I often tell young audiences, “No tweet, no text in the world will ever replace someone you care deeply about whispering in your ear, ‘I love you.’” And you can’t hold hands with a smartphone and get the same reaction that you do when you’re going to your first prom. I do not ever want to hear a love song that begins, “A tweet is just a tweet as time goes by.” We need to collectively raise their sights so that the 21st century will be simply an extension of the 20th century, which was widely known and will endure as the American century.

For a hundred years from now historians will look back on this time, on this election, on this passage in our lives in the midst of this economic downturn, when we’ve all been forced to reexamine values and futures, and those historians will make a judgment. Not just about Barack Obama, not just about Mitt Romney or the Tea Party or Rachel Madow or Bill O’Reilly. They will make a judgment about all of us. Did the American people have a full appreciation and understanding of the gifts that they have in their citizenship? The possibilities of doing whatever they need to do to keep the American Dream alive. Therefore, my own strong suggestion is that whether we are Republican or Democrat, Libertarian or Independent, whether we work with our hands or our minds, whether we’re white collar or blue collar, whether Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Atheist, we have no greater obligation to each other and especially to those coming up next: my grandchildren, your grandchildren, the generation that will inherit whatever we leave behind. We have no greater obligation this year than to re-enlist as citizens. Thank you all very much.

(Applause)

Thank you all very much. One of the hazards of being in the business that I’ve been in all of these years is that all of us at the stage in our lives, our hearing is pretty much gone even with the help of hearing aids, it turns out. Walter Cronkite used to say in situations like this, “I’m sorry, but the acoustics in here are not what I’d like them to be.” And finally he just gave up and said, “Well that’s not true at all, I’m deaf as a damn post, it turns out.” I guess I can say that in a church setting. At any rate, we have two microphones, we’ve got some time for questions, not a lot, turns out, but if we could get you to come to the microphones and ask the questions, I’d be happy or if you have answers I’d be happy to hear those as well. Yes sir, young man.. Oh he’s going to read it; that always worries me.

Student 1: Does it [the mircrophone] work? The Vietnam War was the first American war to be widely reported on television. How has international reporting improved or worsened since the Vietnam War?

Tom Brokaw: That’s actually a very good question when you put it in the context of international reporting. I think there’s no better example than the Arab Spring, and so that’s a demonstration of how it’s been improved. That would have been a remote and almost abstract development for most Americans, but because of the internet and because of television and satellite television, they could see that movement, which is profound and will last for a long time, take place from the ground up. We have a remarkable young chief foreign correspondent by the name of Richard Engel. You may know him; he speaks Arabic, graduated from Standford. He’s somewhere out on the front lines tonight. Richard can get on the air from anywhere. Now, moreover, for all the attention that those people who take responsibility for the greatest cacophony in journalism make the most noise there are some astonishingly sophisticated foreign correspondents out there, so I think it actually is very, very good, and broadcasts now are working harder at talking about why these developments are important. The Middle East is going to command our attention for a long time.

Student 2: Mr. Brokaw my name is Lindsey Gideon. I am a senior from the College of St. Benedict. Thank you for joining us tonight. In your astounding career what would you say has most changed the way that you view the world? What has most affected you and how?

Tom Brokaw: Well I think the most profound change that I have witnessed in the world, and it’s happening every day, is that it’s a smaller planet with many more people. By smaller I mean metaphorically it’s smaller because of the reach of this technology and the way that we interact with each other economically and culturally. When I first went to China in 1974- I didn’t go with Nixon on the first trip, but I was there in ‘74 and then went back; I’ve been back many times- when I first went to Beijing in ‘74 and then rode trains two years later to Shangai and all the way down to Hong Kong, it was really an 18th century country for the most part, and Beijing itself was an early 20th century city. Now for those of you who travel there, you know it’s a 22nd century city. It won’t be long before they’ll have a hundred cities with more than a million population. Stop and think about that. And in each of those cities they’ve got to provide housing, utilities, jobs, vehicles, transportation of some kind or another. We have never ever in the history of mankind been witness to this kind of transformation. So that’s a profound change. Everything now happens at warp speed, and one of the tests of journalism is how do you keep up with it? As I come back from around the country, which I do on a regular basis, and meet with the producers of the Nightly News and the Today Show and the senior editors and the senior officers of NBC news- they still at least look like they’re listening to me- I say to them “Now, here’s how it’s changed, and here’s how you have to think about what you do on a daily basis.” What has changed is by the time someone comes to the Today Show even overnight, in the morning at 7 for the morning show, or 6:30 at night or 5:30 in the Midwest with Brian for the Late News, almost all of you know what has happened. You know what happened over night. You no longer tune in to find out what happened, you tune in to know, what does it mean? How is it going to affect my life? And that is a sea change and what our responsibility is and really what the DNA of journalism has to become.

Student 3: Mr. Brokaw, you spoke earlier tonight of the intense political partisanship that divides our country. Do you think that political parties are good or bad for American democracy?

Tom Brokaw: Well I do think.. for all the troubles that I have with the form of convention these years because they really have become infomercials. They’re so sanitized and scrubbed; we know who the candidates are going to be before we get there. The speeches are put together to sell something rather than to reveal something. The delegates who get onto the floor have been instructed before they sit down when to stand, when to sit, when to cheer, what to say to the press, how to attack the opposition. Despite all of that- and it does remind me of an infomercial, I half expect them to get a kumquat juicer on the way out- despite all of that, there’s something kind of reassuring about saying, the tribes of America coming together in one city because they care about who’s going to lead them and in what direction. So I don’t think you’re going to have a big change in the parties anytime soon. The Tea Party is a big player this time, to a great degree out of proportion to its numbers because they’re so efficient in what they do, and they’re so disciplined. I said on Meet the Press and surprised a lot of people, “Whatever else you think about the Tea Party you’ve got to give them credit. They’ve played by the rules; they got angry; they got organized; they got to Washington, and they stayed on message.” I’m in touch with a lot of them, not just because I’ve said that but because I want to know where they think they’re going to go next. So that’s an interesting example of how you can organize from the ground up. But the parties are in place in a way that it will be hard to dislodge them anytime soon.

Student 4: Mr. Brokaw, in recent years we have seen a lot of reporting from the common person, i.e. from the iphone or from their own technology and posting it for the world to see. What role does that type of journalism have for the future and will that play a bigger role in the future?

Tom Brokaw: Well it’s that the technology is now a kind of early warning system when you talk about tweets and text messaging and that kind of thing. When the helicopters were landing at Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan in Abbottabad, actually somebody in that neighborhood tweeted ‘American helicopter is landing at compound.’ Before the word got out somebody had spotted it. And the Pakistanis are, by the way, very, very intense when it comes to the use of these small devices because they don’t have hardwiring in a lot of their country. So when you go there, they’re light years ahead of us in the efficiency of their PDA’s and how they use them and so on. Somebody tweeted that; that happened a lot. That was the form of communication for, and especially in Egypt, between the people that were on the streets of Cairo because the government tried to shut down the internet, and they found a way to circumvent that and get at it. We get information from those areas, but you have to put it through a filter to know whether it’s reliable or not, and that really becomes the test. So my quick piece of advice to all of you is you can’t be couch potatoes anymore. You have to develop your own very aggressive way of testing the information that is coming to you over these devices.

Student 4: Thank you.

Student 5: Mr. Brokaw you’ve talked a lot about the partisanship and the division in our country, and you’ve also talked about an idea for the future and, you know, a new beginning for the country. But the generation that will be doing this, you know, my generation, has been reared as one faction or another in this country. But it would have to overcome that division to do what you said. How do you think that would happen?

Tom Brokaw: Well there’s an easy example that I use for your generation. First of all, you should start within your generation. But there are a lot of movements in America that started from the ground up. One of my favorites is MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Before a Maryland mother lost her daughter, a teenage daughter to drunk driving, drunk driving was far too socially acceptable in this country. We’ve all been guilty I’m sure, with the exception of those of you who are absolutely abstemious, of driving when we’ve had too much to drink. We kind of got away with it, but we didn’t always get away with it, and the carnage and the consequences were enormous. That woman, Candace Lightner, said, “This will not stand.” And she was a mother from a middle class household, and she changed the social landscape of this country. Changed the laws, changed the idea that social drinking and driving can go together, she gave us the idea of designated drivers and the crackdown and screenings that go on in different areas. That’s a perfect example of one woman saying, “Here’s a need; I’m going to fulfill it.”

Student 6: Mr. Brokaw, how do we move past the.. how do we ask more of our news media to move past the he-said she-said model of journalism to a more honest and investigative model that helps us to actually have a constructive dialogue? Thanks.

Tom Brokaw: It’s the he-said she-said is.. I actually.. Bill Maher jumped on me today in a completely outrageous way in his posting. As you know, Bill Maher has a very liberal point of view and likes to hear his own voice. (Laughs) I said the other day that that Chris Matthews took after the Republican national chairman for the comment that Mitt Romney made in Detroit in which he said, “You don’t have to ask for my birth certificate; I was born right here,” and then he kind of gave that awkward laugh that he often gives. Chris saw an extraordinary birthing conspiracy and racism in all that, and they went at it pretty heavy. I was sitting next to Chris and I finally leaned in and I said, “You know, look, I think it was an example of Romney’s really awkward sense of humor, but I do think it’s fairer to ask the Republican chairman why there hasn’t been more condemnation from the top about President Obama’s americanism. I mean John Sununu said he doesn’t know what it’s like to be an American; I thought that was outrageous and about whether or not he’s a Muslim. He’s not a Muslim; he’s a Christian. Now I also said that works the other way too; Democrats have made some pretty outrageous charges about Mitt Romney. So today Bill Mar said, “Well Brokaw is just one of those that believes he has to be objective when he’s ignoring the obvious here.” That I thought was a perfect example of what I was trying to do with strike a balance. If you work harder as a news consumer you can find lots of detailed explanations about positions and personalities. There’s a new book out by David Maraniss about Obama’s early years. Bob Woodward has a book out now about the negotiations between Speaker Boehner last year and the president. All the big newspapers beginning with the Minneapolis Tribune and others do great detailed accounts. But you can’t be a couch potato; you’ve got to work harder at it. Ok, we’ve got time for.. let’s just make these the last ones. Over here first.

Student 7: In this recent election, we’ve seen both candidates have to change their positions to match the party. Do you feel that in recent years candidates have had to change themselves more to fit the party or have the parties had to change themselves more to fit the candidates?

Tom Brokaw: No, I think it’s.. no I think that what’s happened is that.. The internet can become a form of tyranny in a way that it holds everyone to a very narrow position. The idea of compromise, the idea of trying to find middle ground has pretty well been eliminated from the political culture, in part because sometimes, out of proportion to their numbers, people who have very strong feelings about those narrow points of view can what I call ‘unleash a jihad’ against somebody with whom they disagree. And we saw that in the Republican primaries this year, everybody running as hard to the right as they could, way to the right. There was no better example than when that question was asked, “If you could get ten spending cuts from one tax increase would you take it?” and no candidate on that stage would say, “I’d take a tax increase if I could get ten spending cuts” because they knew what the audience would do. In that audience if you were going to say have said, “I’m going to raise taxes” the place would have gone crazy; there would have been a lot of booing. So they stuck themselves, I think unfairly, in a real corner. Ok last question here.

Student 8: Thank you Mr. Brokaw, my name is Jeremy Wahl, and I’m a political science major; I’ll spare you the rest. I have a brief question for you, one which is simple and yet complex and one which I’d normally save for a philosopher, but I ask a pragmatist such as you in this case: when looking on the future, do you see the world through a view of pessimism or optimism, and more importantly, why?

Tom Brokaw: If I could see the future with great clarity I would not be here giving a speech; I’d be playing stocks long somewhere in America. Look, in my lifetime it has only been a rising tide. Stop and think about it. Who would have believed the Soviet Union would come down the way that it did and expand freedom in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet satellites? Who would have believed that China would transform itself as it has? It’s incomplete from a political point of view, but in terms of economic opportunity and productivity and aspiration who could have believed that? Who would have believed we’d make the kind of advances that we have in the sciences, especially the medical sciences in America? I’ve had the privilege of serving on the board of the Mayo Clinic, and when I went on I thought, ‘this is going to be interesting. I’ve had a lot of pretty rewarding experiences in my life, and I’m looking forward to this one.’ I had no idea what a thrill it would be to meet with those doctors and researchers on a quarterly basis and hear what they’re doing and see what they’re doing at the clinic, not just in Rochester but in Jacksonville and in Scottsdale as well. We are expanding the rule of law and rights constantly.

As I look across this audience, it’s a lot different-looking even in white bread Minnesota than it would have been 25- 30 years ago in terms of what the people are doing and the kind of impact that they have on society. You go through the Minneapolis airport now and you see, as you are well aware, Islamic people or Islamic clerks; you see them from East India and from Eastern Europe. We’ve always been an immigrant nation. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t control our borders; I believe that we should, but we ought not to lose sight of the fact that what has always strengthened us is that those who have come here from elsewhere, including all of our ancestors in this audience, have come here because they believe that they can improve their lives and they’re willing to help each other. Can you imagine what it was like to clear the forests in Minnesota and break the soil or to go to South Dakota where there were no trees whatsoever and the soil was not as deep and as rich as it is here and live in sod houses? And within a relatively short period of time create communities and rule of law and agriculture that is feeding the world? It’s an astonishing story. That’s our heritage. And so I’m an optimist. And on that note, I thank you all very much.

(Applause)