THE NEW SCHOOL

2012 University Commencement Remarks from Robert Hammond

President Van Zandt, faculty, fellow honorees, parents, friends and members of the class of 2011, I am honored and delighted to be here today to help celebrate the New School class of 2011 as it takes its big leap into the real world.

As no one in this class has to be told by me, you enter that world in a challenging time. The economy is uncertain, and arguably still perilous. And the country still has not regained its psychic bearings in the years since it was shaken to its core by an attack whose principal target was in walking distance from the New School itself. To put it mildly, the world that has been bequeathed to you is something of a mess. But my guess is that you are smarter than many, if not most, of those who have presided over it. Today I urge you to seize your own historical moment as an opportunity to right the wrongs before you.

The decade since 9/11 has been the strangest time I have lived through in America, and I am old enough to have lived through the 1960s—when my own college years were marked by a bloody confrontation between students and police and a general strike that shut down classes for weeks. And next to what was happening beyond my campus—two assassinations, a tragic war in Southeast Asia and urban riots—my college experiences were, relatively speaking, the good times back then.

The character of the first decade of the 21st century has been something else. A quieter calamity, yet more insidious in its way. In the 60's, at least, there was agreement about what was happening in America, whatever side you were on. These days the very definition of reality has become skewed. It has been the age of truthiness. Truthiness, of course, is a gag concept, coined by the brilliant comic Stephen Colbert. But there is nothing funny about how it has played out in our national life.

Just before Al Qaeda's attack, we learned that the hottest corporation in America, Enron—also a major financial backer of the newly elected President Bush—was largely an empty shell of fictitious criminal corporate entities, sometimes named after characters from Star Wars. Then came 9/11, after which this country undertook a wildly costly and counter-productive war in a country that did not attack us, in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist. Next up was the disastrous housing bubble—during which millions of Americans

bought houses with non-existent cash and Wall Street peddled toxic financial products derived from all those play-money mortgages.

The crash that followed wrecked not only the economy but wiped out the savings of millions of Americans—much as the war in Iraq sabotaged America's efforts to rout out those who actually attacked us on 9/11. But whether on Wall Street or in Washington, no one has been punished for all the damage that was inflicted. That too is unreal. No wonder that reality television—an Orwellian locution if ever there was one—remains the nation's favorite opiate. If The Real Housewives of New Jersey is reality, we can discount and escape from the scarier realities not on screen.

As America more or less leaves Iraq and stumbles through an uncertain recovery from the crash, you'd think our ostensible leaders would be embarking on some kind of course correction. For the most part, that's hardly the case. I dare say that many freshly minted New School graduates could do better than what we're seeing from Washington.

One of our major political parties, the one occupying the White House, has not done nearly enough either to address chronic American joblessness, or to challenge an economic order in which the superrich, even those responsible for the meltdown, get to play on a tilted playing field while the poor and what remains of the middle class are either patronized or relegated to rot on the sidelines.

As for the other party—well, it's hard to know where to begin. Its only fervent belief is in the allegedly miraculous power of top-tier tax cuts to address any national need. The right's radical contingent, the Tea Party, shows that it's possible to appropriate the slogans of the American revolution—and dress in colorful revolutionary drag—while subverting almost every fundamental American principle. It is all too fitting that the Tea Party's congressional leader, the compulsively watchable Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, recently paid her own tribute to the revolution by making the public assertion that the shot heard round the world was fired in New Hampshire, not Massachusetts. When reality is dead, anyone can make anything up.

In this sense, Donald Trump, may his political career now rest in peace, was the perfect politician for our time. In truth, his much mocked hair may be the most real thing about him. He is the star of a surreal reality show. He presides over a highly leveraged real-estate and corporate empire that at times licenses the brand Trump to hollow if not outright deceptive products, including a so-called university. His presidential ambitions were built on a lie about the incumbent president's birth certificate. It is, I guess, a small compensation that the building we're convening in today is one of the few garish slabs of architecture left in Trump's hometown that does not bear his name.

All of which is to say that there is quite a lot of work to be done to repair America. And the class of 2011 arrives at this crossroads with real advantages that will well serve those of you who choose to address this task. The first advantage is the ethos of the New School itself. In its inspiring history, values and intellectual passions, no educational institution better represents the bedrock American ideals of freedom, independence and diversity—especially as practiced in the great city of New York in the modern era. These values are needed by our country now more than ever.

You are also given a technological head start of a magnitude known to few previous generations. To be sure, human nature doesn't change: there will always be crime and stupidity and greed and porn in cyberspace as in any other space. But the possibilities for leveraging political and social change for the better are extraordinary is this new world, as I don't have to explain to anyone here. Best of all, in this arena, new ideas and new callings can rise to the top more speedily than ever before, even in a country often in hock to corporate interests.

But perhaps the most intriguing asset for the class of 2011 in my view is the inexorable decline of 9/11 as the most potent and often most sinister force in shaping our culture and its distorted definition of citizenship. What happened that day will always be a big hole in the American heart and the heart of this city. Closure, a word finally falling out of fashion, is a hoax. But as we reach the tenth anniversary of 9/11 against the backdrop of Osama bin Laden's demise, we may be reaching a hinge moment. With prodding from a new generation, the darkest shadows of 9/11 may finally start to lift. This class, while old enough to remember 9/11 and to be seared by it, also has the capability to lead the country beyond it.

For too much of the past decade, a terrorist attack on America has been mercilessly exploited by American demagogues in politics and beyond to stoke fear and divisiveness. Whether it's been the federal government's seizure of new and extraconstitutional powers in the guise of keeping us safe or, more recently, the hysteria surrounding the incorrectly named "Ground Zero Mosque," the domestic exploitation of 9/11 for partisan ends or worse has been a drag on American values. It has led to a climate of ugliness—a new McCarthyism.

Few have written more eloquently about McCarthyism than my fellow honoree and friend Tony Kushner, whose Angels in America showed the enduring power of a single voice to affect change in this country. Yet Tony's remarkable achievements did not spare him from getting caught up in a McCarthyesque battle of his own this month, when he was slandered by the City University of New York. As most of you know, an ideological zealot among its trustees misrepresented Tony's views about Israel and then wielded that libel to deny him an honorary degree and, in essence, to try to silence him. CUNY would soon rectify that wrong, but not before many New Yorkers spoke out in protest and shamed it into doing the right thing. That is hardly a happy ending. That so many of a serious university's leaders—including the trustees' chairman, himself a former lvy League university president—could be successfully cowed for even a few days should be a cautionary tale for everyone. If this can happen in New York, it can happen anywhere in America and too frequently does.

Indeed, CUNY's treatment of Tony echoes another disturbing recent national fracas—the rash action of the Obama Administration's Secretary of Agriculture when he summarily fired a federal employee, Shirley Sherrod, after she had been smeared as a racist in a deceptively edited attack video posted on an Obama-hating Web site. If relatively progressive institutions like a Democratic White House and CUNY can be so easily intimidated by a new breed of McCarthy vigilante into behaving so fecklessly, we should not be so quick to self-righteously assume that Fox News and right-wing talk radio are the whole problem. It's time for the next generation of American adults to reverse this dark wave of bullying—whether it's aimed at individuals like Tony Kushner or Shirley Sherrod or at entire classes of people, from minorities like gay youth and Muslims to organized labor to, increasingly and bizarrely these days, publicschool teachers.

People like me giving speeches like this are supposed to bestow advice to the graduates, but I do so with hesitation. After all, I am a card-carrying member of a press establishment that—like so many other American establishments—failed the country in recent years. America's journalistic elite for the most part promoted the fictional assertions and scare tactics that the Bush Administration manufactured to gin up the war in Iraq. The press also gave cover to the Wall Street shenanigans that blew up the

economy. Even now, some in my profession haven't learned from the mistakes that so badly tarnished our credibility. While Trump may be disappearing into the tomb of NBC prime time, we should remember that his brief spurt in the polls was in part because the mainstream press—not fringe, rogue Web sites—insisted on treating him as a plausible contender for the Republican nomination even as he was manifestly babbling nonsense.

My advice to this year's graduates would to be question everything—starting with every establishment, including those that presided over the recent economic debacle and those who have presided over nearly every foreign-policy calamity from Vietnam to the present day. Trust your own internal compass, as honed at the New School, to locate where reality really is.

President Obama was largely elected on promising a change from our recent past. There's plenty of debate, including no doubt among those assembled here today, about the extent to which he has delivered or failed to deliver on that promise. But he was never fated to do it alone in any case, and, like all politicians, however well-meaning, can only take us so far. The real job of rebuilding America begins with you, and few recent classes have been standing on a frontier as potentially exciting as the one unfurling before you now. An exhausted American status quo is ripe to be reformed and usurped—its leadership, its priorities, its sense of community, its generosity. Tony Kushner has written that the world only spins forward—but for that to happen, the world will always need a push.

That challenge, however, can wait until tomorrow. The most important part of being a commencement speaker is to recognize that you are the last thing standing between a graduating class and some much deserved fun. So savor the day, the night and even the morning after. And somewhere along the way do remember to thank your families and your teachers, who did so much to help you arrive at this joyous celebration.

Congratulations, and best of luck to all!