

## A gutsy commencement address

Former Iraq ambassador Ryan Crocker, a Whitman graduate, issues an unlikely Niebuhrian challenge to the class of 2009

**By Anthony B. Robinson**

**May 28, 2009.**

**Former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker** gave a courageous and eloquent commencement address to the graduating class at Whitman College on Sunday, one that seemed at odds with the setting and the occasion. And that may have been his point.

Whitman is located in Walla Walla, a small Eastern Washington town some have taken to calling “Sonoma North,” a reference to its recent transformation into a wine-producing capital. The graduation exercises unfolded beneath bright blue skies, warm sun, and the spreading branches of sycamore and elm trees on a campus that might fairly be described as “classic,” both for its beauty and the way it seems a haven from the world. I was there as the proud dad of a graduating daughter.

In such a setting Crocker's challenge to the graduates to “March to the guns,” meaning head for the action and where the battles are real in a conflicted world, was a contrast with the otherwise light-hearted and festive nature of the day as well as the bucolic setting. From his opening observation, “We must deal with the world as it is and not as we might wish to it be,” to his “March to the guns” conclusion, Crocker described a world where the U.S. faces determined adversaries and conflict with genuine enemies. That he did so in soft-spoken cadences of a diplomat did not diminish the force of his assessment.

A 1971 graduate of Whitman, Ryan Crocker has just retired from a distinguished career of 38 years in the Foreign Service. Since 2007 he has been the ambassador to Iraq, and was, along with Gen. David Petraeus, frequently the point person in explaining the Bush administration's “surge strategy” before Congress. Prior to the post in Baghdad, Crocker had served as U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon. He was assigned to the American Embassy in Beirut during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the bombing of the embassy and the Marine barracks in 1983. It was after that bombing that President Reagan precipitously withdrew U.S. forces in the region rather than risk political fallout.

While Crocker is a Foreign Service officer and not a political appointee, and is widely respected in that role, he did offer a resolute, if low-key, defense of the Iraq War. He noted that, “Today many people do not remember what a threat Saddam Hussein posed to the United Nations system,” a reference to Saddam's defiance of UN resolutions and weapons inspectors. He acknowledged that the U.S. may have made a mistake in going to war in Iraq “without our traditional allies,” but suggested that the same allies were mistaken not to involve themselves. “Perhaps, we have both learned something.”

**In making this defense of the Iraq War to a student body** and college community much more likely to be critical than supportive of it, Crocker implicitly denied the idea that the war could simply be dismissed as an ill-conceived adventure of the Bush administration. Moreover, he worried about the U.S. capacity for sustained commitment in such conflicts, noting how different U.S. elections in the course of the long war reflected waxing and waning public support. In a particularly ominous comment, Crocker said that it is when the U.S. feels it has achieved victory and is done with a conflict that our adversaries are often and only then ready to begin their fight.

In a reference to the College's namesake, missionary Marcus Whitman, who famously said that he came west because his plans required “time and distance,” Crocker said both time and distance are necessary for U.S. plans and policies today. But the “distance” Crocker had in mind seemed not so much geographical as something like the perseverance of the long distance runner.

Crocker's larger point to the graduates was that they would now be adults and citizens in a world where there are battles to be fought and that they ought not shirk them but “march to the guns” and head for the action — a path Crocker himself had taken on leaving Whitman.

For students and their families lifting a glass of Chardonnay later that sunny afternoon, Crocker's words may have seemed a bit grim. But, again, this may have been his point. As the ambassador concluded, a handful of the audience rose up, attempting a standing ovation. The majority were not so moved.

One might disagree with Crocker's defense of the Iraq War and still be engaged by his larger argument. In pursuing this line of argument, Crocker continued a long-standing debate with the American liberal tradition about relative danger, the reality and presence of evil, and the resort to force.

**Recall the pre-World War II debate between a more pacifistic** Protestant establishment and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, an author particularly admired by President Obama. In the immediate wake of the First World War, Niebuhr had joined others in an embrace of pacifism and diplomacy and by renouncing the use of force. In the face of Hitler's Germany, Niebuhr abandoned that stance. Moreover, he argued that the reigning liberal establishment was naïve and was failing in its responsibilities precisely by seeing the world as it wished it to be and not as it was.

In his recent career and his commencement speech Crocker stands in the Niebuhrian tradition among liberals. It is a tradition that holds that good intentions are not enough, that there is actual evil in the world, and that evil must, at least at times, be actively confronted and resisted.

In his closing words, Crocker urged the assembled families, students, and friends to set aside time the next day, Memorial Day, to remember those who were fighting and those who had given their lives in service. Then he told that graduates: "Real life begins Tuesday. Be on time."

*Anthony B. Robinson is an author and teacher who is former senior pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle. For the past several years, his column on religion and values appeared in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.*

**View this story online at: <http://crosscut.com/2009/05/28/politics-government/19023/>**

**© 2009 Crosscut Public Media. All rights reserved.**

Printed on May 28, 2009