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Remarks of Senator Edmund S. Muskie at Narraguagus Regional High School Commencement

Edmund S. Muskie

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MUSKIE News

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NARRAGUAGUS REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

HARRINGTON, MAINE

I am proud to share this moment with you because your graduation has a very special meaning for me.

My first statewide campaign began in the year most of you were born. As high school seniors in 1971, you have lived a larger part of your lives as my constituents than anyone else.

You are too young to recall my time as Governor or my first years in the Senate. You had more important things to do than noticing my career. You were learning to walk and to speak, to laugh and to love, to care about people and places.

Through all those years, you -- like every other citizen of Maine -- had a right to my concern and my commitment and my service. I have tried not to let you down -- and I hope you think I have succeeded -- if not always, at least often enough. Now, on your graduation day, I have come home again to fulfill another tradition of public men. I have come to Narraguagus High School to speak directly with each of you for the first time, Senator to constituent.

The only frank and honest way for me to start is by noting some apprehensions in Maine about my present course. It is no secret that I am thinking of running for President. And some of my friends and neighbors have made no secret of their fear that I am turning away from Maine -- that somehow, sometime, my roots here have been weakened -- that I care less now than I did before about the land which has given me life and opportunity.

-- more --

None of my words could wholly relieve those apprehensions. And this is not the time or the place to talk about politics. But I would like to share with you tonight some of the beliefs I have learned during more than a half-century in Maine. They are what led me to public life in the first place. They are the reason for my conduct now -- and the reason I may run for President next year. They are beliefs rooted in the traditions of our state. They are the same beliefs I hope you will take with you from this school and this graduation.

I hope Maine has taught you -- as it once taught me -- to care about our environment -- about the earth God made and the earth man has remade.

To walk through the woods near Cherryfield, to fish in the Narraguagus, to pick blueberries a few yards from your back door, to see the clean, simple streets and homes of Milbridge is to understand how much it means to keep our world safe for a truly human existence. That is the challenge and the chance for all of us, each in our own lives. I found it in Rumford and you have found it here. It is the common heritage of Maine.

I hope Maine has also taught you -- as it once taught me -- to care about economic decency for people.

My high school graduation came in the midst of the Great Depression. In those years, I saw hunger and sorrow in my own town, next door and down the block. And you have seen some of the same things here, in the poorest county in the Northeastern part of America. Maine is fighting now as it always has to build something better. And none of us can ever abandon that fight.

And I hope Maine has taught you -- as it once taught me -- to care about community and mutual trust.

As a child, I felt the slights of an immigrant's son. But I also felt the respect my father earned as he made a place for himself and his family. I have always remembered a truth

you have probably already discovered -- that the quiet, reserved citizens of Maine know how to overcome prejudice and bring people together. The struggle is far from over, in this state or any other. And its ultimate outcome depends on us.

Finally, I hope Maine has taught you -- as it once taught me -- to care about other people and other places.

Only a few years after I returned from law school to Waterville, thousands of us left the state to defend freedom on the other side of the globe. Some of Maine's men died for foreigners they did not know and could not even talk with. But they knew how vital it was, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase, to "live for others." They knew that neither a man nor a state could in good conscience forget the rest of the country or the rest of the world.

Their example must inspire our efforts. Each of us has a part to play. All of us must stretch ourselves to defend our beliefs. And none of us can settle for our own success alone, in this city or this state or this nation.

As we work to realize the principles we have learned in Maine, we will disagree about policies and politics, one from another. That is not important. What is important is to care and to act in the tradition of Maine. Whatever I do and whatever you do, that must remain our common compass.

It can direct so many of the decisions you and your classmates already face.

Will you move out of Maine -- or will you remain or return later to help shape this beautiful state into a better place to live?

Will you then look only to yourselves and your town and our state -- or will you look beyond our borders to apply what you have learned here to make a difference elsewhere?

Will you turn off and cop out -- or will you use your new right to register and to vote -- to make your voices heard and your views count?

None of you know where fate and the work of your own hands will take you in the decades ahead. Thirty-nine years ago, when I graduated from Stephens High School, I could not even dream of the opportunity Maine would bestow upon me and my family. But I was anxious to reach out and touch the promise of things to come.

That should be your resolution as you leave high school tonight -- and it should be your resolution through all the years of your lives. You will find, as I have found, that you must choose again and again. There will always be new promises to reach for and new potentials to realize. There will always be new challenges to the principles Maine has made a part of each of you. And there will always be another chance, here and elsewhere, to build a future equal to your heritage.

No citizen worthy of this state can decide to forget the spirit of this state. I believe you will remember. I believe you will care. And I believe you will give of yourselves for Maine and the nation and your fellow men.

Perhaps the most important truth I have learned in my years of public service is that you are important. This is your night -- and it is not a night for long speeches. So I would like to stop now. And I would also like to thank each of you for sharing your special moment with me.

Everything I am and everything I hope to be is due to Maine. You and your parents and this state have given me the central belief of my life. It has guided me and I hope it will guide you. In Maine and in America and in the world, whatever we can do, and whatever we dream we can do, we must begin now.

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