

MIT 150 | President Carlos Salinas de Gortari—1993 MIT Commencement Address

PROFESSOR: It is my pleasure now to welcome to this platform the Honorable William F. Weld, governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and a member of the Institute's governing board, and His Excellency, Carlos Salinas de Gotari, President of the United Mexican States. President Salinas will now give the address.

[APPLAUSE]

SALINAS: Dr. Charles Vest, president of MIT, Dr. Paul Gray, chairman of the MIT Corporation, Governor Weld, mayor, faculty and members of the Corporation, distinguished families and guests, members of the class of 1993.

[CHEERS]

I heard in the invocation that perhaps it's a problem for Harvard being too close to MIT. It took me 10 years from graduating from Harvard to become president of my country, and 15 years to get from Harvard to MIT. It's not that close, but far enough.

[LAUGHTER]

It is a great pleasure for me to deliver this commencement speech today. I appreciate this, which I consider a distinction. MIT has steadily built great prestige since the first class of 15 students walked through its doors in 1865, always remaining a truly unique institution. It will be fondly remembered as the home of engineering wizards, but its strength lies in educating generations of young men and women with the highest expertise in their fields, who are mature and insightful, ready and willing to shoulder the great demands and responsibilities that society lays upon its most promising citizens.

I come here today to recognize that the class of 1993 is a unique class. Certainly because of each individual in it. But more than that, because seldom in a generation a group of students enters higher education in one world setting, and leaves its studies in a world totally different to the one before.

Four years ago, when you entered MIT, the world was very different from the one we live in today. Few historical periods have been subject to such a profound and rapid transformation. While you were studying, the map of the world was being redrawn. And I must say that nothing compares to the implications of putting aside all boundaries, all ideologies, and to abandoning the terms with which individuals, societies, and nations define themselves.

The basic framework of which the world operated when you entered MIT is already gone. And today, uncertainty has increased. The Berlin Wall, a bastion of the Cold War era, has folded, bringing down with it the old equilibrium, and the old certainties of the world order. The Soviet Union ceased to exist as such, leaving a legacy of several republics, each struggling to discover its individualized identity. And nations that got together before, due to the threat of the Cold War, today face regional conflicts.

These changes have meant the end of illusions for some, the end of anxieties, and the revival of old fears for others. Uncertainty for all of us.

In the former world system, there were precise positions with respect to ideas, personalities, and even heroes. Capitalism and communism presented the basic framework for debate, for analysis, as well as for action. There were clear and opposing points of reference, planning versus the market, individual rights versus community needs, formal democracy versus social participation. Duality left no room for confusion.

Today we know that centralization and big bureaucracies have not, as promised, been the answer for promoting better opportunities for society. Ideologies, with a deterministic conception of development, have been abandoned. In many countries, some heroes of the past are now considered the architects of doom, imbalances, and inefficiencies. But there is also this disenchantment with views that reduce all to politicking, which means no direction.

On the economic front, markets are being integrated more and more. Globalization is a fact of economic life. Isolation is a self-defeating dream. Yet the distance between the richer and poorer nations of north and south grow deeper and wider. While you were studying at MIT, the world changed.

My country, Mexico, has also changed dramatically. We come from a decade, the '80s, when we faced very high inflation, a huge public deficit, and a tremendous public debt, with no economic growth in almost a decade, with no investment in education, in infrastructure, and certainly not in social development. This, in a country of 85 million people, which is adding every year almost 2 million more to the total population, south of your border.

We were at the end of a development process, based on an inward looking, over-protected economy, a suffocating presence of the state, and on the political side, a practicality single party system. We had to change. Change because there were was changing very rapidly. Change because every Mexican demanded a new opportunity, a different way of doing things.

And change we brought. Inflation to the lowest in a quarter of a century. And promoting an institution, an independent central bank, to assure that inflation will not reappear again in the future. Growth we recovered, five years of permanent growth above population increase. Deficit we eliminated. No more budget deficits. Now a surplus. A surplus to assure that inflation will not return.

Somebody called it a slight surplus. Let me tell you, to eliminate a deficit, a surplus is never a slight. You either have it, or you don't. Debt, we got rid of it. After representing almost 2/3 of our gross domestic product, internal debt, which in European countries is 60% of GDP, in some others, 110%, or 150%, today in Mexico, domestic debt is only 10% of GDP. Or in simple words, we have learned, fellow students, that there is life after debt.

[LAUGHTER]

For many years, we've also neglected the investment in the fundamentals. And fundamentals refers to social programs, and among them, to education. We are convinced that an economic strategy will not be successful without a firm social program. That is why we have placed the highest priority on education, because education means increased competitiveness. But beyond that, education means better income distribution.

And in a country like mine, where women who do not finish primary education, have the double of children in relation to those who finish primary education. For us, this reform is essential to bring the demographic rate down. And we have promoted this emphasis on education. Almost doubled, in real terms, the budget for education. And at the same time maintaining our surplus, decentralizing more than 100,000 schools to states and municipalities, reinforcing the contents of education with a return to basics-- to language, to mathematics, to history, to geography. But also, education for a better environment, and civics, that is, values and standards.

We have also stimulated the retraining of our teachers. This, through encouraging them to prepare them for an evaluation. Yes we evaluate our teachers. We don't call it a test. No teacher would like to be tested. But we do evaluate them. And a few weeks ago, more than half a million teachers around the country decided to take this evaluation. And today, we can assure that we will be preparing a much better generation in basic and higher education.

Channelling more resources to social programs without populism, nor paternalism, and at the same time, assuring that grassroot movements participate in the decisions that affect their future, respecting the dignity of those who have less, and need so much. Social policy that emphasizes that economic growth, without care for the environment, is actually the need to reduce points to the rate of economic growth.

Mexico and Brazil are two countries alone that hold half of the world's bio-diversity. A single tree in the tropical forest in the south of Mexico has more different species than some European countries. Therefore, we must make sure that we protect this wealth that belongs to our countrymen, but most of it, to the world in which we live.

Channelling more than 1% of GDP to the protection of natural resources, creating new protected areas the size of a European country, and certainly improving the quality of air in Mexico City alone that has more than 16 million people living in an enclosed area. Taking steps like closing a huge refinery in that city that meant the overnight loss of more than 6,000 jobs, but certainly to provide a better environment for millions of people living in that city. Or planting in merely two years more than 100 million new trees, or improving the quality of life in our border towns.

And also finding an equilibrium between culture, ecology, and community. The amazing sights of Mexico are today protected without cutting the rainforests around them. On the contrary, archeology and ecology can go hand in hand in stimulating the everyday life of the community, and harmonizing society with the environment.

This is one of our highest priorities, because talking about the environment means more than a political commitment. It requires an ethical one. It's the kind of world that we will leave to our children, and the children of our children. It's our commitment to the economy, to education, to the environment, to social problems.

But in the world of today, where the threat of global nuclear war is over, we must recognize that there are still wars to be avoided, and wars to be waged, to be strengthened. The wars to be strengthened are the wars on drugs. The wars to be avoided are the ones regionally, or the looming of trade wars.

I have to emphasize the war on drugs, because this is a threat that is materializing in all our societies. Mexico is not a drug-consuming society, but drug traffickers pass through our country looking for other markets. That is why we are so committed to fighting drug traffickers, arresting more than 85 individuals, seizing more than 200 tons of pure cocaine, which is equivalent to double the value of our total external debt.

But we are fighting them because drug gangs turn violence into pain, indignation, and tragedy, as it happened a few days ago, where they slain, while fighting each other, one of our bishops, Cardinal Posadas. This is outrageous, and we are committed to punishing them, and to reverting this process affecting ours, as many other countries in the world.

The problem is that for us the cost of fighting drug trafficking is as high as the profits they make in other countries. We must reduce those profits in order to abate the cost and the pain that they inflict upon our societies while we fight them. We will strengthen international cooperation. We are determined at not losing this war, because then we would be losing our new generations. This is a war that we must strengthen.

But I mentioned that the war that we most avoid is the one looming on the trade front. At the end of this century, global trade and freer trade is the way to improve the standard of living of our populations. That is why we in Mexico have proposed to the US and to Canada a free trade agreement. That is, the free movement of goods and services among sovereign nations.

For Mexico, taking this step is a very important one. For many years, my country tried to live as far as it could from the US for good historical reasons, due to traumatic experiences.

There was a Mexican president at the end of last century, who used to say something that was sort of mentioned in the invocation. The Mexican president used to say, "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States."

[LAUGHTER]

This reflected a historical reality. We had to change our mentalities in order to decide to get closer to our mighty neighbor to the north. It's a new reality and we are willing to live with it.

By the way, if you allow me to share with you what a friend of mine from Israel told me. When I referred to him this phrase from the Mexican president, he said, "Well, in Israel, we say the reverse, 'Poor Israel. So close to God and so far from the United States.'"

But realities have changed. Have changed in the rest of the world, have changed in my own country. That is why we are proposing the free trade agreement. The North American Free Trade Agreement is called NAFTA. I think that it was called like this by an engineer. It sounds like a gasoline.

[LAUGHTER]

But NAFTA-- I want to emphasize-- NAFTA is a job creating agreement because by increasing competition in our three nations, and its competitive capacity, it will allow us to compete with regions which are getting together in Europe, and in the Asian Pacific countries. Not as closed war books, but open to competition, and increasing the standard of living of our population.

NAFTA is an environment improvement agreement, because with additional resources, we will take better care of our environment. NAFTA is a wage-increasing agreement, because we are committed to increasing real wages in Mexico, more than they have increased up today, when NAFTA is ratified. And NAFTA is a migration-reduction agreement, because Mexicans will not have to migrate north looking for jobs in this country, but they will be able to find them in my own, which is my main commitment.

If Mexico prospers, the US and Canada will prosper. That is why this is not a win-lose solution, but a win-win-win situation for the three countries in the northern part of the American continent.

The Latin American community is watching eagerly for NAFTA's success, because it means hope for the whole region. And for the rest of the world, increased competitiveness. And this is good for all of us.

What does it mean to the North American region? What does it mean to an MIT student, who is graduating today? In carrying out your studies, this tremendous change in the world, in Mexico, and in Mexican-American relations, may sound far away. But the world that you will now encounter will not let you forget its relevance in your daily life. You will compete for a job dependent upon what happens in Europe, in the Asian Pacific countries, and also in Mexico.

Today, again, unique in a generation, the questions you are asking yourself after graduating are similar to the ones that a president, or a head of a state, is facing. What is the place for the individual, for society, and for a nation, in the new world order? What's the role of technology, and also of morals and ethics? How to balance modernization with an environmental and social responsibility?

You may allow a foreign experience, perhaps that of Mexico, to fuel your thoughts. We have not solved every problem. On the contrary, we are facing new ones. But our experience of change may shed some light on your own enormous capacity of transformation.

As you finish your higher education today, you are now being challenged to make a transformation, perhaps the most important of your life. There are two ways to look at it. You are either standing at the crest of change, and can increase its impetus, or you can attempt to resist, and eventually be swept away. Do not drift. You have proved that you do not avoid your responsibilities. As you have done here at MIT in the last four years, reach out, reach high, remember history, use your knowledge to grab the spirit of our times.

You will be among the best prepared professionals in the world. I challenge you respectfully to tackle the future with the same international character that MIT has always shown. We are living the exceptional opportunity to be part of the creation of a new era. I am confident that you will be true citizens of the new world order. That is why I am convinced today that yours, the class of 1993, will certainly be a class of experts, who really care.

Congratulations, and good luck.

[APPLAUSE]