

Pomp and circumstance: Bush as commencement speaker

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

It was a blustery day in late April when a colleague poked his head into my office and asked, “Have you heard the news? Nicholas Wolterstorff has been replaced as commencement speaker. George Bush is coming instead.”

It was an April day, but not April 1. An e-mail bulletin from the provost confirmed that this was no joke. The president of the United States had accepted the college’s invitation, or invited himself, to send the Calvin College class of 2005 off into their future lives with the benefit of presidential words of wisdom.

Republican congressman Vernon Ehlers, a former physics professor at Calvin, had extended an invitation, we were told. But such invitations must pile up many inches deep on some White House underling’s desk. Furthermore, Ehlers’s stubborn dissent from his party’s environmental and energy policies—areas of his own expertise—cannot have endeared him to a president for whom loyalty is the queen of all virtues.

Local speculation traces the ambiguous honor to the Bush team’s favorable impressions of the college in a 2000 Republican candidates’ forum, where security was tight but unobtrusive and discussions were honest and substantive. Calvin’s graduates include past and present leaders of the state legislature and several prominent contributors to the discussion of the policy of federal agency support for “faith-based initiatives.” And then there is the political complexion of western Michigan, where voters tend to forget that after a local or national candidate wins the Republican primary, we must still go through the legal formality of a general election. In response to parents who are dismayed to find that there are outspoken Democrats on the Calvin faculty, I have argued that this is legally required under federal laws regarding critically endangered species.

News like this tends to stir things up, and soon there was a blizzard of postings on an electronic discussion board. Some faculty members expressed outrage that

Calvin would permit its name and image to be exploited for partisan politics. Others expressed outrage that their colleagues would be so inhospitable to a duly elected head of state. Elected, schmelected, came the rebuttal: the guy stole the White House with the Supreme Court's help and will use our event to spread the lie that all good Christians are Republicans. Others relayed students' worry that an event intended to celebrate their accomplishments would become a media circus.

My own first reaction was that we would certainly not get nearly as good or as appropriate a speech as we would have from Wolterstorff, whose latest project involves the themes of biblical justice and *shalom* that he explored in an earlier book, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*.

I find myself on the horns of a dilemma. Perhaps we should all accept the honor graciously, keep what shreds of integrity in the ceremony we can, and hope the speech is indeed about church-state cooperation to lift up the downtrodden rather than about why those horrible Democrats are trying to keep "people of faith" from being confirmed as judges. Many of my students and colleagues voted for this president, after all, and complaining about partisanship sounds to them a lot like partisanship.

But this seems like a cowardly withdrawal, given that I can't count the ways in which the Bush vision for America and the world diverges from my understanding of a kingdom in which justice counts for more than power, faithfulness for more than wealth, and compassionate understanding for more than "preventive" war. The prophets had a lot to say about braggarts and bullies, after all. When Israel's kings built a case for war on a tissue of lies, or told the poor to look after themselves because the rich could not afford to feed them, Jeremiah and Amos did not zip their lips but made noisy nuisances of themselves.

Simply to sit politely and applaud on May 21 seems more than hypocritical: it seems like a betrayal of my college's Reformed and biblical heritage. President Bush deserves my respect, not only as head of state but also as a brother in Christ who sincerely believes his policies conform to biblical principles. But in this, I am convinced, he is profoundly and tragically mistaken.

So perhaps I should find some respectful but unambiguous means of registering my dissent at commencement. But there's the rub: where most past presidents, even the most blinkered ideologues, have been willing to meet with their critics

periodically and countenance peaceful dissent on public occasions, the Bush White House has taken extraordinary measures to keep all protests miles away, screen attendees at public events, and guarantee news footage of happy cheering throngs returning the president's warm affection.

As a member of the faculty, then, I fear I will have only two choices: to sit quietly in the Calvin fieldhouse, after being searched thoroughly to be sure I am carrying no dangerous weapons such as a "stop the war" placard; or to carry that placard back and forth in front of a lone television camera in a mall parking lot over on the other side of town.

Send me a dollar in cash and two boxtops and I'll send you one of the WWAD bracelets I want to order, to remind me of my duty when commencement comes this year. It stands for, "What would Amos do?"