Doug Rothwell
“We Are Transitioning Into an Even Greater Period”

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You’re starting your new careers at one of the most important and fascinating times in recent history.

While our country faces great challenges, in many ways, we’ve never had it so good!

- The world is largely at peace
- Living standards, despite the recent downturn, are higher than ever
- Our life expectancy and quality of life have never been longer or better
- We can pursue pretty much whatever fields of endeavor we want, when we want to
- We have access to nearly unlimited amounts of information and technology
- We live in the strongest, wealthiest, most diverse, most entrepreneurial, most dynamic country on Earth

No doubt terrorism, economic mismanagement, and the pace of change have unsettled many of us. But, when put in perspective, we should have great reason to believe we are transitioning into an even greater period of prosperity and dynamism.

I think Churchill said something that describes this time about right:

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

How can we who are working for the public good approach this “end of the beginning?”

First, having worked in all three sectors—public, private and non-profit—I can honestly say no one sector has all the answers and no one sector necessarily works better than the other. But one conclusion I have reached is this: nothing solves problems like a strong economy and no sector drives the economy like the private sector. So no matter what field you go into within the public or non-profit sectors—finance, human services, or environmental management—always be mindful of accomplishing your work in a way that allows the private sector to grow, because growth provides the fuel that allows you to do your job.

Second, define your career as being a catalyst for action. A catalyst precipitates or speeds up change by getting others to embrace a new direction. Today, working in silos or a hierarchy doesn’t work. We are in an open, flat, fast world. We can’t effectuate change by ourselves or through one organization. Certainly, government alone can’t get the job done. We need to develop ideas, strategies and solutions that others embrace. Partnerships, coalitions, and collaborations are better approaches than new programs, regulations, or laws.

Third, embrace change while keeping the traditions that work. I started out by saying we meet this “end of the beginning” from a relative position of strength. So let’s not feel we have to re-boot our entire way of life all at once. Sharon and I thought we might need to a few months ago when the stock market crashed, and then we realized we still had good jobs, our home, and tickets to Carolina basketball! Life was good!
So, let’s keep what’s working. For example, hard work pays off most of the time. Twenty-percent down on a mortgage is a good thing. Competition makes us better. You can be proud of your country and still think there’s room for improvement. It’s ok to hate Duke!

I’m a big fan of Churchill, so I’ll end with one more of his thoughts that I think fits the times pretty well:

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

Thank you—and do great things!

Doug Rothwell has been President of Detroit Renaissance since 2005. During his tenure Doug has led the development of the region’s first economic growth strategy—the Road to Renaissance. He has also helped found One D, a collaboration of the region’s major civic organizations and has advocated for structural reforms in state finances. Prior to joining Detroit Renaissance, Doug served as Executive Director of Worldwide Real Estate for General Motors.

He also founded and was President and Chief Executive Officer of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Previously, he served as Chief of Staff to the Governor of Delaware and was an Executive Vice President at MBNA Corporation. Doug is a member of the UNC School of Government Foundation Board. Read Doug’s commencement remarks here.