

Commencement Remarks at Colby-Sawyer College

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen

President Stuebner, faculty, graduates, family and friends. It's an honor to share this very special occasion with you. Thank you, President Stuebner, for your kind words – and thank you to the entire Colby-Sawyer community for this honorary degree. And, congratulations to the [Class of 2018!](#)

Our Founding Fathers and Mothers won America's independence, articulated our highest ideals and forged the world's greatest democracy. At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was asked what form of government they had created. He famously answered: "A republic, if you can keep it."

The open question that confronts your generation is: *Can we keep it?*

Our democracy is built upon essential principles that guide both citizens and elected leaders. Today, some of those foundational principles are in peril – the rule of law; the right to vote; freedom of the press; and compromise. These guiding principles are eroding – and we need to shore them up. All of us need to rededicate ourselves to these tenants for our democracy to continue to thrive.

The Rule of Law sounds pretty boring, right? But I'm not talking about being pulled over for going 70 in a 55 mph zone. Sure, that's one aspect of the rule of law, designed to protect individuals from harm. But when it comes to a well-functioning democracy, there's a more fundamental aspect of the rule of law. It is the rule of law that protects citizens from overreach by the government. It's why we have

checks and balances within our system. In our democratic system, no one is above the rule of law.

One of the most important checks on government rests with the citizens – the **right to vote**. That's why legislation that is being proposed across the country to make it harder to vote is so dangerous. Making voting more difficult degrades our democracy. The only way we can have a better, more responsive, more representative government is for people to participate.

Another crucial check on our system is a **free press**. With the advancement of technology and social media, we have access to information like never before. But people are also susceptible to propaganda and disinformation like never before. We've seen what Russia did in our 2016 elections, and we have to be vigilant and guard against it happening again. Ensuring a free and fair press is up to each of us. So before you share that "news story" with your thousands of Twitter followers, please check the source!

There is an increasing tendency among Americans to listen only to those we agree with – one casualty of this trend is that **compromise** has become a bad word. Boy, I see that in my job every day. Democrats and Republicans in Congress are hearing from and listening only to voices they agree with. And, at times, our political supporters see any compromise as betrayal of principles. That's a very dangerous trend. This country was built on compromise. So many of our great legislative achievements, from the Civil Rights Acts to the Clean Water Act, were the result of compromise. And we need more, not less, compromise because it means people are working together to address our challenges.

Each of us has a responsibility to defend the values and norms of our great American democracy. And that's why I'm thrilled to see the rising generation – your generation – stepping boldly into the public arena. I hope you will make your voices heard; I hope you will vote; and I hope some of you will run for public office.

But you don't have to serve in the legislature or in Congress to make a difference in your communities. The Sustainable Learning Initiative at Franklin Falls is much more than just an experiential learning opportunity for Colby-Sawyer students. It shows how students in collaboration with faculty and the Franklin community are developing business ventures, expanding recreation opportunities and revitalizing that historic mill city. As the result of the student engagement, Franklin is experiencing a 21st Century renaissance!

And as you make your voices heard, remember to also listen. Because people are going to disagree with you. But that doesn't make them bad and that doesn't make them the enemy. We are all members of our American family, and we need to try to better understand one another and embrace our common decency again.

My parents' generation – the Greatest Generation – saved the world from Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism and built the mightiest economy in history. My generation – the Baby Boomers – sent a man to the moon, eradicated some of the world's most deadly diseases and developed the Internet.

Now, what will your generation do? What will be your legacy? I think you're going to do great things. And the world cannot wait to see what you accomplish!

Congratulations to our graduates and your families. Class of 2018, go get 'em!