Harvard is an institution that has made a great difference to you, ladies and gentlemen, as indeed it has to all the people of the United States and to humanity at large. You are right to be proud of this great institution.

You also should be proud of many other institutions that the United States has envisioned and nurtured and that have provided great service to this nation and to the world.

I am speaking of those international institutions that, by promoting the causes of peace, prosperity, and human rights, have helped decisively to improve the quality of human life in the last 50 years. The world improved over its execrable performance of the first half of the twentieth century not solely but significantly because of the international system of rules and institutions that was developed in the period around the end of the Second World War.

This afternoon I want to speak for this international system. Particularly at this time, let us not forget that this system was to no small extent the product of the political genius of great American leaders. Let us not forget what your admired president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, meant to do when in 1941—just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor—he spoke not only of winning the war, but also of winning the peace that would follow. Roosevelt’s purpose was to promote the enactment of rules to govern international behavior and the creation of institutions to foster international cooperation. He foresaw nothing less than the building of the United Nations as the centerpiece of a system charged with keeping the peace among all nations and making them collaborate for the common good.

And so, when the time came, the United States led the world in creating a system of multilateral institutions to restore stability and security. The United Nations charter was negotiated and ratified in San Francisco, and the organization itself was housed in New York. At a conference not far from here—in Breton Woods, New Hampshire—the IMF and the World Bank were established to guide international economic cooperation and invest in reconstruction and development; they were subsequently headquartered in Washington, D.C. The United States led the creation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to foster international commerce. Eleanor Roosevelt played a key role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Europe, the United States created NATO and later encouraged the development of the institutions that became the European Union.

General George Marshall stood on these very steps in 1947 and warned of the dangers that “hunger, poverty, despera-
tion, and chaos” posed to the newly freed nations of Europe. By paving the way for postwar reconstruction, those words helped remake the world.

Why did American and other world leaders in the 1940s and ’50s devote so much energy and so many resources to building international institutions? Because they had learned from the bitter lessons of two world wars and the Great Depression. Because they had seen the destruction that results when nations are divided and pursue only their own self-interest. So they sought to create a system, anchored in freedom, openness, and the rule of law, that would support the security and prosperity of all its members.

**American and other world leaders had seen the destruction that results when nations are divided and pursue only their own self-interest.**

How well has this system worked?

Like any human creation, it has had its shortcomings and even some big failures. But its successes are impressive beyond doubt.

International institutions have fostered a greater convergence of values than has ever before occurred in human history. For the first time, most of the world’s governments are democratic. Principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law are almost universally accepted. Even regimes that routinely violate these principles proclaim their allegiance to them—proving that freedom has won the argument! A principal reason for this universality of rights and values is the wide array of United Nations documents that define and prescribe them. Starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN has orchestrated a series of global covenants that together make up the body of international law. Let us remember that none of this was foreordained. It is owed to the patient efforts of committed individuals and governments across the world.

The multilateral order has also presided over mankind’s greatest period of wealth creation. The impressive economic expansion achieved by the United States and other industrial countries would not have been possible without the multilateral economic system. The great strides we have seen in technology, healthcare, and the many other things that enhance the quality of our lives emerge directly from this prosperity. In the developing world, millions of people have been lifted out of poverty, though much more remains to be done. Again, none of this was foreordained. The international economic order has encouraged nations to trade and interact with each other. Without this framework, we would live in a much worse world than we do today. Allow me to emphasize this: International cooperation has not been a useless abstraction. It has been a powerful and tangible force driving global prosperity.

Today, however, the international system appears to be in crisis. Deep disagreements have emerged about how best to combat new threats to international peace and security and how best to preserve and extend prosperity in the world.

Contempt for the multilateral system can be seen in the marginalization of the UN, the transatlantic rift, the division in NATO and the European Union, and the current resentment among old friends, neighbors, and partners.

Does the record warrant this contempt? Certainly not, as I have just argued. But that is not the relevant question. What is at stake now is not the interpretation of the past but the building of the future. So the relevant question is: At the beginning of this new century marked by unquestionable unipolarity, who needs the multilateral system?

My claim (along with many others’) is that all nations, even the most powerful, need the multilateral system.

Certainly the weaker members of the international community would prefer to navigate in the international arena according to agreed international rules and by means of institutions in which their voices can be heard and their legitimate interests represented and recognized. This case for multilateralism is too clear to need elaboration.

What about the United States, the true hyper-power of our era? For this country, the case for multilateralism is no less compelling, though it is more subtle. Of course, this country’s leaders must look after U.S. national interests. In deciding how to interact with the rest of the world, any government must put its own national interests before global altruism. Perhaps this is why some influential people are tempted to believe that to protect its national interests, all the United States need do is to exert its unmatched military and economic power—even if that means sidelining the multilateral system.

I dare to dissent with this view, however, not only because it can lead to unwarranted adverse consequences for other countries, including my own, but also because, as a friend, I want to suggest that unilaterism may actually undermine the interests of the United States itself.

The fundamental flaw of the unilateralist way of thinking is that it ignores how interdependent all countries—the United States among them—have become, for better or for worse. True, the rest of the world depends perceptibly on what the U.S. does or does not do, but the converse is also true. The world in our time may be unipolar, but it is interdependent, too.

At this hour of global interdependence, even the mightiest power has limits to its influence, to its capacity to control how others react to its actions. For unipolarity to be more than a moment in history, others must perceive it not as a threat but as a true anchor of peace. Peaceful and lasting unipolarity depends on the multilateral system—as much as the multilateral system depends on the enlightened, not the aggressive, leadership of the sole hyper-power. Aggressive unipolarity, sooner rather than later, would set the world in search of a different equilibrium, one in which the military power of the United States could be balanced. This process would prove expensive and tragic. A world with so much poverty...
cannot afford another arms race. A world
that has made so much progress in em-
bracing the values of democracy deserves
better than to relapse into threats of mu-
tual destruction.

Further, the United States is not ex-
empted, even by the sheer force of its
power, from problems that inexorably call
for internationally coordinated responses.

Consider for a moment the biggest se-
curity concern of this and many other na-
tions: transnational terrorism. It would be
dangerously naive to think that terrorism
can be fought single-handedly. Can terror-
ists be defeated without international co-
operation? Can the international traffick-
ing in deadly weapons or the spread of fanaticism be stopped if countries do not
work together? Never. Combating terror-
ism requires the support of friends, allies,
and sometimes even adversaries. To achieve security, military might is not all
that counts.

International cooperation advances not
only the security but also the military su-
periority of the United States. It would be
cynical not to believe that the multilateral
instruments, including the Nuclear Non-
proliferation Treaty, adopted to prevent
the spread of weapons of mass destruc-
tion in fact help to entrench the over-
whelming military advantage of the Unit-
ed States.

Besides security, the United States and
all countries face other problems that re-
spect no national boundaries and therefore
require global cooperative solutions. Think
goal warming, destruction of biodi-
versity, depletion of fisheries, ocean pollu-
tion, infectious diseases, drug trafficking,
or human smuggling, just to name a few.
Not one of these dire challenges can be
met by a nation acting alone. Only through
international cooperation can there be any
hope of success in combating them.

Equally, in the pursuit of prosperity and
the prevention of evils such as interna-
tional financial crises, recessions, and now
deflation, international cooperation is
vital to success. Economic cooperation is
needed now more than ever. There is a
danger that the multilateral trading sys-
tem could become the battleground of un-
settled geopolitical disputes, with disas-
trous consequences. This danger haunts
the ongoing WTO Doha round of trade
liberalization—now practically dead-
locked—and fuels numerous trade dis-
putes between old partners. The Doha
round must be saved and the neoprotec-
tionist spiral must be checked right now;
any later may be too late. International co-
operation is also needed to tackle in a co-
ordinated fashion the very serious macro-
economic imbalances afflicting all the
major economies of the world. Failure to
coordinate will make the unavoidable ad-
justment more painful and could eventu-
ally cause a major headache in the interna-
tional economy.

I am aware that some in the unilateral-
ists’ camp are mindful of these arguments.
They are ready to concede that the United
States must swallow a dose of interna-
tional cooperation in the pursuit of legiti-
mate national interests. And so they pro-
tose to live by double standards.

Interesting but not convincing.

**Combating terrorism requires the support of friends, allies, and sometimes even adversaries. To achieve security, military might is not all that counts.**

Could international cooperation coex-
ist with aggressive unipolarity? Hardly, if
at all. A useful multilateral system de-
pends on negotiations, compromises, and
agreements. None of these can be
cultivated in a soil of acrimony and re-
sentment. From this soil spring the
weeds of antagonism, envy, and fear—
weeds that may crowd out the inclusive
globalization and constructive interde-
pendence that are needed today more than
ever.

Inclusive globalization is needed not
only by the weak of the world but also by
the strong; not only to defeat economic
and social polarization but also to allevi-
ate old and new resentments that threat-
en the security and stability of our world.
Constructive interdependence is needed,
not only to better share the benefits of
prosperity but also to achieve better mu-
tual understanding—and, eventually, irre-
versible mutual respect and tolerance. In-
terdependence is not always free of transi-
tional tensions. But embracing in-
terdependence is the only way to achieve a
truly international regime of toleration—
that is, of the peaceful coexistence of peo-
ple with different histories, cultures, and
identities. I believe it is only through the
deliberate building of this interdepen-
dence, practical step by practical step,
that we can achieve a more prosperous
world with lasting security—a world in
which the poor and excluded are released
from misery and the privileged are re-
leased from fear.

In 1945, the United States saw the wis-
dom of building an inclusive world order
in which every country could have a voice.
True, since then much has changed, but
much abides. True, the United States now
enjoys unprecedented strength, but so it
did in 1945. True, we face appalling new
dangers today in the form of terrorism.
But, in a deeper sense, terrorism feeds on
the same forces that General Marshall
fought to overcome with his plan for re-
making a Europe: the eternal enemies—
hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos.”

To defeat terror, and to defend democ-
racy and freedom, humanity and its lead-
ers must prevail against those eternal ene-
mies. This can only be done by working
together through the multilateral system
that, I repeat, was built under the impulse
of the United States.

I submit that it is time to stop bashing
the multilateral institutions. They are no
better or worse than what the major pow-
ners put into them in terms of leadership,
skillful bilateral diplomacy, and resources.
The right way to proceed is not to under-
mine these institutions but, where need-
ed, to reform them so that they can better
serve the good causes of human rights, se-
curity, peace, and prosperity.

Going forward, this enterprise will re-
quire the enlightened, not the aggressive,
leadership of the United States. It will re-
quire the leadership and constructive
power that was used in Doha in Novem-
ber 2001 to launch the new round of trade
liberalization; in Monterrey, Mexico, in
March 2002 to commit a significant in-

On the third day of my eight-week stint as a summer-school proctor, the mother of one of my charges reminded me of the difficulties that can arise from sharing a bedroom at Harvard. She was compact, the sort of woman whose tan is meant to be offset by tennis whites. When she swept into my room, her mortified daughter trailing behind her, I was immediately conscious of both the chip in my right front tooth and the unflattering fit of my Harvard Summer School-issued T-shirt.

"Why," she asked, grinning furiously and gesturing at a closed door with one manicured hand, "does that girl have a single?" Her own daughter, one of the half-dozen 16-year-old girls for whom I would be responsible, had been placed in a five-person suite with four bedrooms. "It doesn't seem quite fair that two of the girls will have to share a bedroom."

"Gosh, I don't know," I said. "The housing office is just inscrutable that way." When I am nervous, I tend to affect a vaguely Midwestern ingenuousness and say "gosh" a lot—a tic borne, I think, of my conviction that during a crisis one ought to model oneself after Dorothy Gale. (Under less trying circumstances, the word is absent from my lexicon.) I also tend to use polysyllabic words to prevent people from asking whether I really go to Harvard.

"I know why people have single rooms during the year," the woman said, narrowing her eyes to underscore her caniness. "It's because they pay more."

"Oh, dear, no," I told her. "Gosh, no. That's not the way it works here."

"Really?" she said, looking at me. I smiled an ingenuous smile—close-lipped, to hide my chipped tooth—and folded my arms over my tent-sized T-shirt, trying to deflate its ampler billows. The woman wasn't taken in. Glancing at the Converse All-Stars I'd been trying unsuccessfully to burrow into the carpet, she asked in a honed voice, "You said you went to Harvard?"

During orientation, veteran proctors had warned us against worrying too much about the parents. "Just remember: it's not you, it's them," one grizzled proctor had told us, and we had laughed the blithe laugh of the innocent. But in this case, I knew him to be right. It was not my chipped tooth, not my ill-fitting T-shirt—not even my feigned ingenuousness that had provoked the woman's disdain. At least, it wasn't exclusively any of those things. "They just want what they think is best for their kid," the proctor had told us; and we had laughed the blithe laugh of the innocent. But in this case, I knew him to be right. It was not my chipped tooth, not my ill-fitting T-shirt—not even my feigned ingenuousness that had provoked the woman's disdain.

Although I no longer share such beliefs, I remain sympathetic to those who lust after singles. My friends at other schools take it for granted that having roommates means sharing a bedroom; at Harvard, though, the widespread bedrooms-plus-common-room arrangement means that having a bedroom of one's own is usually considered both an attainable and desirable goal. Matherites tout the singles' only status of their