Howard Dean speaks to the Graduating Class of 2009

"This country has been multicultural for a long, long time," Dean said to the more than 9,000 people attending the commencement ceremony, "but you are the first multicultural generation that see itself as multicultural — and the first thing you did was to elect a multicultural president."

His speech praised the activism of the young "pragmatists and doers" who propelled Barack Obama to the White House — and contrasted it with the "confrontational" politics of his own political upbringing in the civil rights battles of 1960s and '70s. He noted how in 2008, for the first time in his lifetime, "more people voted who were under the age of 35 than over the age of 65."

Dean cited poverty, climate change, and the humanitarian crisis in Sudan as examples of a broadly shared agenda for change that extends beyond the traditional membership of his own Democratic Party. "The core message of your generation to my generation: would you stop fighting about the things you've been fighting about for thirty years and get something done about the things that need to have something done about them?" he said, to loud cheering.

"We need you to stay involved in politics," Dean said to the graduates, warning against a retreat from civic engagement as career and family responsibilities develop. "Now that you've elected your first president," he said in conclusion, "don't blow it."