

# *We Can Speak Truth to Power...*

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Jean Rohe, May 20, 2006

New School university graduate, Jean Rohe used her commencement speech to pre-empt Senator John McCain's warmongering address. Below is the text of her remarks. She began her speech with a song:

*If all the world were peaceful now and forever more,  
Peaceful at the surface and peaceful at the core,*

*All the joy within my heart would be so free to soar,*

*And we're living on a living planet, circling a living star.*

*Don't know where we're going but I know we're going far.*

*We can change the universe by being who we are,*

*And we're living on a living planet, circling a living star.*

Welcome everyone on this beautiful afternoon to the commencement ceremony for the New School class of 2006. That was an excerpt of a song I learned as a child called "Living Planet" by Jay Mankita. I chose to begin my address this way because, as always, but especially now, we are living in a time of violence, of war, of injustice. I am thinking of our brothers and sisters in Iraq, in Darfur, in Sri Lanka, in Mogadishu, in Israel/Palestine, right here in the U.S., and many, many other places around the world.

And my deepest wish on this day--on all days--is for peace, justice, and true freedom for all people. The song says, "We can change the universe by being who we are," and I believe that it really is just that simple.

Right now, I'm going to be who I am and digress from my previously prepared

remarks. I am disappointed that I have to abandon the things I had wanted to speak about, but I feel that it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the fact that this ceremony has become something other than the celebratory gathering that it was intended to be due to all the media attention surrounding John Mc Cain's presence here today, and the student and faculty outrage generated by his invitation to speak here. The senator does not reflect the ideals upon which this university was founded. Not only this, but his invitation was a top-down decision that did not take into account the desires and interests of the student body on an occasion that is supposed to honor us above all, and to commemorate our achievements.

*I am young, and although I don't profess to possess the wisdom that time affords us, I do know that preemptive war is dangerous and wrong, that George Bush's agenda in Iraq is not worth the many lives lost.*

What is interesting and bizarre about this whole situation is that Senator Mc Cain has stated that he will be giving the same speech at all three universities where he has been invited to speak recently, of which ours is the last; those being Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, Columbia University, and finally here at the New School. For this reason I have unusual foresight concerning the themes of his address today. Based on the speech he gave at the other institutions, Senator Mc Cain will tell us today that dissent and disagreement are our "civic and moral obligation" in times of crisis. I consider this a time of crisis and I feel obligated to speak. Senator Mc Cain will also tell us about his cocky self-assuredness in his youth, which prevented him from hearing the ideas of others. In so doing, he will imply that those of us who are young are too naïve to have valid opinions and open ears. I am young, and although I don't profess to possess the wisdom that time affords us, I do know that preemptive war is dangerous and wrong, that George Bush's agenda in Iraq is not worth the many lives lost. And I know that despite all the havoc that my country has wrought overseas in my name, Osama bin Laden still has not been found, nor have those weapons of mass destruction.

*We can speak truth to power, we can allow our humanity always to come before our nationality, we can refuse to let fear invade our lives and to goad us on to destroy the lives of others...*

Finally, Senator Mc Cain will tell us that we, those of us who are Americans, "have nothing to fear from each other." I agree strongly with this, but I take it one step further. We have nothing to fear from anyone on this living planet. Fear is the greatest impediment to the achievement of peace. We have nothing to fear from people who are different from us, from people who live in other countries, even from the people who run our government--and this we should have learned from our educations here. We can speak truth to power, we can allow our humanity always to come before our nationality, we can refuse to let fear invade our lives and to goad us on to destroy the lives of others. These words I speak do not reflect the arrogance of a young strong-headed woman, but belong to a line of great progressive thought, a history in which the founders of this institution play an important part. I speak today, even through my nervousness, out of a need to honor those voices that came before me, and I hope that we graduates can all strive to do the same.