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President Bush at Calvin College

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President George W. Bush delivered the commencement address at Calvin College on Saturday, bringing national attention and unprecedented stature to the college's commencement ceremony. Unfortunately, his presence also brought controversy. Something like a third of Calvin's faculty signed an open letter protesting the President's visit to the campus. According to The Grand Rapids Press, the letter, published as an advertisement in the paper, lambasted the President for "neglecting the needy to coddle the rich, desecrating the environment, and misleading the country into war." These deeds, the statement declared, "do not exemplify the faith we live by."

This is a sad spectacle and an inappropriate politicization of an academic ceremony. Without even addressing the over-the-top language and claims made in the statement [hardly worthy of serious political engagement], the protest should be an embarrassment to all who supported it. No political leader is above criticism, and President Bush's policies—like that of every President—draw both praise and lamentation. But the President of the United States is more than a political leader; he represents the nation as Chief Executive. President Bush did not go to Calvin to deliver a political speech, but to take part in a formal academic ceremony. Even the local newspaper saw the issue more clearly than the childish faculty members who staged the protest. As the paper editorialized, a graduation ceremony is no place for this kind of protest.

In the paper's words: "When Bush comes to Calvin on Saturday, he comes as president of the United States. Some have accused the White House of turning Calvin College into a kind of backdrop for a political campaign. But that's an unfounded accusation. The campaign is over. Bush is not running for president again. It is unlikely he'll deliver a political speech. We believe those who have an objection to the president's appearance at Calvin have a First Amendment right to express themselves, and we hope there will be no retaliation against them for doing so. But so few people graduating from college will ever be able to say a sitting president was their commencement speaker. We hope the public objection to Bush's appearance at Calvin doesn't spoil the day for its graduates."

In his speech, President Bush made reference to Abraham Kuyper, one of the luminaries of the Dutch Reformed tradition that gave birth to Calvin College. The President honored Kuyper for his understanding of the role of voluntary associations in the culture: "No one understood this better than another 19th century visitor to America whose name is well known to Calvin College: Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper was a Dutchman who would be elected his nation's prime minister, and he knew all about the importance of associations because he founded so many of them — including two newspapers, a political party, and a university. Kuyper contrasted the humanizing influence of independent social institutions with the "mechanical character of government." And in a famous speech right here in Grand Rapids, he urged Dutch immigrants to resist the temptation to retreat behind their own walls — he told them to go out into their adopted America and make a true difference as true Christian citizens."

WE LINK, YOU DECIDE: See reports in *The Grand Rapids Press*, "Calvin Professors Speak Out Against Bush," "Calvin Protest Shows Christianity Divided," and "An Honor at Calvin." From *The Detroit News*, "President's Visit Stirs Dissent at Conservative Calvin College." and from *The Detroit Free Press*, "Pomp and Politics in Grand Rapids." See also the text of President Bush's address published by the White House. Other materials are available through the weblog at Christianity Today.

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