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# 'Find the joy in life,' Bush told Wellesley graduates

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Commencement speeches are as much a part of a modern first lady's job description as hosting state dinners and reading to school kids.

Michelle Obama averaged almost six per spring. Lady Bird Johnson, known to be terrified of public speaking, still managed to exhort 16 graduating classes not to be afraid to pursue their dreams.

But no president's wife in a scholar's robe ever sparked as much attention as Barbara Bush's appearance before Wellesley's Class of 1990. The three big networks carried the speech live, followed by the kind of commentary usually reserved for a State of the Union address.

"I believe it was the first, last and only time all three networks interrupted regular programming to cover a first lady's speech live," Edward McNally, a speechwriter in the Bush White House, recalled Tuesday, hours after Barbara Bush died at 92. "It was an unusual national moment, to say the least."

What brought the media glare to an otherwise unremarkable cap-and-gown ceremony was a potent mix of feminist tension and Cold War politics.

The invitation to Wellesley had been unremarkable. The White House traditionally dispatches the president and first lady each year to a variety of universities, military academies, historically black institutions, state schools and the odd elite campus. Bush had been a student at Smith, and speaking at another of the "Seven Sisters" women's schools seemed a natural fit.

According to McNally, a presidential speechwriter called to the East Wing to join the first lady's team in preparing for graduation season, the address she would give at

Wellesley was essentially the same as she would give at St. Louis University and other schools that year.

But Wellesley would be different. Students there had voted to invite writer Alice Walker, who declined. After Bush was announced, some seniors complained. Bush may have [attended Smith College], but she had dropped out at 19 to marry a patrician young Navy pilot named George H.W. Bush. Not quite the Wellesley way, 150 of them said in a petition protesting the choice.

“To honor Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker is to honor a woman who has gained recognition through the achievements of her husband, which contravenes what we have been taught over the last four years at Wellesley,” it read.

The controversy grew. President George H.W. Bush publicly defended his wife’s life choices. Pundits weighed in and Barbara Bush, who had never been a lightning rod, found herself at the center of a national debate about the nature of feminism that would continue for decades.

“I have no recollection that she had ever been protested before or since,” said McNally. “It was a real one-off in her life.”

When graduation day finally arrived on June 1, 1990, curiosity was sky high. Further, it was just seven months after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the date happened to coincide with a summit in Washington between President Bush and Russian



President Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev’s wife, Raisa, traveled with him.

Wellesley, it was decided, would get not one first lady but two.

They seemed to be in it together, according to the exhaustive coverage. They held hands, and Raisa, a former university teacher

herself, reached out with reassuring touches as Bush spoke and the world watched.

She wowed them.

"Barbara Bush's speech to graduating seniors at Wellesley College in Massachusetts yesterday, aired on all the networks, was a rock'em-sock'em smash hit," wrote Tom Shales, the Washington Post's TV critic.

"Clearly a victorious day for Barbara Bush," said CNN.

"One of the best commencement speeches I've ever heard," Tom Brokaw said at its conclusion.

What the critics loved, and the students too, judging by their applause, was Bush's direct challenge to the notion that anyone but the woman should choose a woman's path.

"One of the reasons I made the most important decision of my life, to marry George Bush, is because he made me laugh," she said. "Find the joy in life, because as Ferris Bueller said on his day off, 'Life moves pretty fast; and if you don't stop and look around once in a while, you're going to miss it.' "

The crowd of 5,000 was with her from the beginning. She exhorted them to chase their careers but to never forget that "you are a human being first and those human connections — with spouses, with children, with friends — are the most important investments you will ever make."

At the end, she tiptoed up to controversy: "And who knows? Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the president's spouse ..."

But when she ended with this: "... and I wish him well," they gave her a prolonged standing ovation as she and Gorbachev beamed.

When she returned to the White House, staffers had strung a banner for her. It said, "A job Wellesley done."

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