

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
The Secretary's Farewell Ceremony
Marine Barracks Washington
8th and I Streets
Washington, DC
Friday, January 23, 2009

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming.

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In the remaining time I have here, I will be saying many goodbyes, but I wanted to make sure that I had an opportunity to say a special goodbye to all of you.

More than that, I want to thank you.

I want you to know how much I appreciate that which you have done, and how much my interaction with you has left me grateful for this experience—more than I ever could have imagined.

This goes for all of you—Sailors, Marines, and civilians, both in government and in industry.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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Many people have asked me if I have any regrets about the decision I made roughly four years ago to leave private industry and consider taking a position in government.

My answer is—none whatsoever.

I have held many interesting jobs in my life, but no period in my professional life can compare to this experience.

This has been, as expected, an intellectually challenging experience, as I have been faced with a wide variety of issues ranging from shipbuilding to the chaplaincy.

It has been, at times, physically challenging, as I have traveled to visit with our Sailors and Marines deployed throughout the world.

Perhaps most difficult has been the emotional challenges of dealing with the consequences of a nation at war, with the inevitable sacrifices that that entails from our service members and from their families.

I freely admit that I learned a lot about the real meaning of military service from my time in this job.

As many of you know, and as I have noted on numerous occasions, my background in industry conditioned me to focus on hardware, software, technology, and the possibilities of science in thinking about military operations.

I did not fully appreciate the human factor in what the Navy and Marine Corps does until I came to this job.

I made it a point to visit as many commands ashore and afloat as I could, here at home and overseas, and on every visit, my biggest take-away was an enhanced respect and appreciation for the people side of what we do.

The technology, the systems, and the platforms are all critical to our effectiveness—no question about it.

But there are certain things that money cannot buy, that no laboratory can produce.

It is highly trained, highly motivated Sailors and Marines with a martial ethos who are the sinew of war—not money, not technology, not even weapons.

Our people are the secret of our success, and the real differentiator among the world's Navies.

I have seen the best of America, and I have learned what a great country this is.

I learned this from talking to Sailors and Marines, from meeting their families, from discovering everyday what our people in uniform are doing in demanding assignments around the world.

It has been humbling, and it has been an honor to serve alongside them.

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More humbling still, and a powerful reminder of the responsibilities of this office, are the letters that I have received and have set aside to keep in my desk.

Many come from Gold Star mothers.

Some, from the wives of fallen heroes.

Others come from ordinary citizens—patriots who just wanted to tell the Secretary of the Navy something heartfelt about the war and the Sailors and Marines who are fighting it.

These letters, I can assure you, cannot be read without emotion.

Some are simply letters of thanks.

As concerned citizens, as veterans, or as longtime supporters of the Navy and Marine Corps, they just wanted to let me know that they appreciate what our Sailors and Marines are doing, and while their voices are rarely heard in the media, they are strong, silent supporters of those who serve.

Some of the most touching and powerful letters are expressions from the heart, from people who have suffered greatly from loss, who know first-hand the sacrifice and hardship of war.

The remarkable thing about those letters is that one quickly notices a familiar pattern.

Despite the fact that the authors wrote what were obviously tear-filled letters that brought back painful memories of loss, they also express a deep, sincere pride in their family member's service, boundless love of country, and a sincere plea that whatever I do, I always try to do the right thing.

They want America to do right by those who serve, and they do not want their hero's sacrifice to have been in vain.

These letters are reminders to me of what is at stake, and that the decisions made here really do have an impact.

Those handwritten notes reveal the existence of a grace and of a quiet strength in the Nation's heartland—in cities, small towns and rural communities across America.

They reveal a level of support, of patriotism, and of faith in America that is impossible to forget.

I tell you again, I have seen the best of America, and the best of America would make our Founding Fathers proud.

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Another aspect of the Navy and Marine Corps that I came to more fully appreciate is the sense of community and shared purpose that is part of the Navy and Marine Corps way of life.

I am convinced that the Navy and Marine Corps would not be what they are without their networks of strong families, from the CO spouses to the ombudsmen to the

chiefs that believe that “taking care of our people” is part of their job.

You see it again and again, as families gather on the pier awaiting the return of their loved one’s from a six-month deployment.

You see it in the way an entire community reacts to that 2am phone call to the command’s ombudsman that a ship, a submarine, or an aircraft has suffered an accident.

Shared joys, shared anxieties, and shared sorrow are part of the lives of everyone in the command, from top to bottom.

And you see it in the countless activities and groups organized by the spouses to support their Sailors and Marines, and to support each other.

You see it in the way Navy Chiefs mentor and develop their younger personnel.

And you see it in the Marine Corps, where the phrase - “Marines taking care of Marines” – is not just a slogan, it is an attitude that goes to the heart of the Marine Corps ethos.

Yes, there are reasons why they think of themselves as an extended family.

For my part, I feel truly blessed to have been a part of the Navy and Marine Corps family.

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I also feel blessed—and again humbled—to have crossed paths with real heroism in our midst.

The first time it truly hit me was during an awards ceremony for two Navy Cross recipients whose battlefield heroics on a remote hillside deep in the Hindu Kush cost them their lives.

It was a very moving and humbling experience, for it also afforded me the opportunity to meet their families.

Developing a relationship with them has been an enduring and rewarding aspect of my time here.

There have been many such moments.

Perhaps most humbling of all, was the time when I had occasion to award four medals to one individual, in person.

I felt like I was in the presence of greatness.

And I was.

The individual in question told me that he didn't deserve the awards—he was only doing his job.

Yes, I really have seen the best of America, and I will never forget it.

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Before closing, I would like to extend a special thank you to the international community.

I have found great value in interacting with you.

I appreciate your having educated me about your Navies, and I trust that the friendships that have developed between us will continue long beyond my time in this office.

It is my hope, as well, that we will continue to promote closer ties between the U.S. Navy and your countries.

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I would also like to say a word to the civilian personnel here today from the Navy and Marine Corps and the industry that supports us.

You represent the corporate memory that is invaluable to maintaining and evolving the fleet and supporting all that the department is charged with doing.

Your efforts have great impact on our service members and all that we are able to do for our Nation.

In that regard, I want to offer a special thank you to those civilians who have volunteered to deploy to the theater, providing logistics support, acting as field service representatives, or performing any of a myriad of supporting services.

Thank you for your sacrifice and hard work.

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Let us all remember that our Sailors and Marines are America's best, and they are deeply proud to serve their country.

What happens in Washington, DC—so far away from days and nights at sea, from life in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, and from Naval operations in commands around the world—matters.

Your work can have an impact on their lives, their safety, and their welfare.

Let us all resolve to do right by our Sailors and Marines.

Let us all remember the less well-known passage in our Declaration of Independence that it is not only the right, but the duty of the people to defend our liberties and to “provide new Guards” for our future security.

With my deepest gratitude, enormous pride, and a humble heart, I bid you farewell.

This has been the greatest honor and privilege of my life, and I will always be grateful for having had this opportunity.

Thank all of you for your support and your service and let me add a special note of thanks to those on my personal staff.

Your support has been invaluable, and I do believe that I have been blessed with the Dream Team of the Pentagon.

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Lastly, if you will permit me one final indulgence, I must tell you that of all the blessings I have received, none will equal that which came nearly 40 years ago when I married Linda.

She has been everything a wife could be—patient, supportive, and most tolerant of the demands of the office.

More so, she has been my principal advisor in many areas, based on her understanding of people, politics, and her engagements with Navy and Marine spouses.

It will be hard to repay all that she has done for me . . .

My God bless our Sailors and Marines, and may God continue to bless America.