

**Remarks as delivered by ADM Mike Mullen
Southern University Commencement Speech
July 27, 2007**

Thank you. I hope I can live up to that introduction. I was going to say Chancellor Ambrose after talking with her, she would want me to say Interim Chancellor Ambrose. I asked her how long she had been doing this, and she said since the 5th of the May when the board called her on her cell phone. She had no idea it was coming. I had a call like that recently myself.

Members of the board, Southern University System President Dr. Slaughter, distinguished members of the faculty, parents, family, friends, and of course mighty, mighty jaguars – it is my great pleasure and privilege to be here with you today.

Your Southern hospitality is second to none. And it's great to look upon your beaming faces. Seeing everyone on my way here all dressed up, I had to make sure I arrived on the correct day. I thought it might be or must be pretty Wednesday. And taking in the amazing beauty of this campus on the banks of the Mississippi, I wish it were Wednesday today so I could stick around for a couple of days.

But alas, my staff got me here – just in time, and fortunately for you, they'll get me out of here just in time too – I have been told to make sure that we grab some Raisin'Cain chicken before we go. So I'll have to keep it short.

Before I leave you to your perfect day, your families, and friends, and to your futures, there are a few thoughts I would like to share with you. First let me say to moms and dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, guardians, friends, this day is as much for you as it is for the students you have steadfastly supported these last few years. Their success is your success and we all appreciate you making this day possible.

The faculty and staff of Southern University, this too is a celebration of what you have accomplished with this class, but indeed one you have dedicated your life to accomplishing. You helped transformed a class of inexperienced freshmen into the young men and women that will usher us into the future.

And of course for the class of 2007, congratulations – you made it; your persistence paid off. And in a few short minutes, you will officially be recognized as jaguar alumni. Make sure you register with the alumni association. Then again, it doesn't matter; they will find you anyway. But you are done here and well done to each and every one of you.

You have gone over the hump countless times. You finished your course work. You've passed all of your exams, rooted for the human jukebox, and 47,136 of you, defenders of the gold and blue --as a Navy man, I happen to like those colors -- cheered the Jaguars on to victory at last year's Bayou Classic.

But most importantly, you have grown and you have earned your education. You along with your families understood what my friend Carl Mack was told by his mom. She said to him, Carl, with a good education, you can go as far and as high as you want.

Now, Carl has had a remarkable career that has taken him to some commanding heights. Today he is known as Brother ED, the executive director of the National Society of Black Engineers, an organization whose mission is to increase the number of culturally responsible black engineers who excel academically and succeed professionally and positively impact the community – all noble goals I would like to talk you a little bit about today.

And this past 4th of July, Carl soared even higher when he got to fly with the Navy's Blue Angels. I think he even got to pilot the plane a little bit, and I haven't even done that, and they work for me.

So to say that Carl has been a success is an understatement. And if asked, he will tell you he earned his success through education, hard work, and service. It is how he measured up.

Well, what about you? Do you have what it takes? Will you measure up to Southern University's higher standards, higher standards for higher goals? How will you achieve your success? How far and how high do you want to go?

Those aren't easy questions, but as you ponder them, I offer you this: whether you're an American or an international guest, black or white, or any other color, you're in a great country where your success, your character, your worth is measured not by where you come from, by what you believe in or how accomplished you are, but rather by the choices you make. How you go forward. How you help your community, your nation, and the world create a better future for all of our children.

In a nutshell, you're in country of opportunities; opportunity to learn, opportunity to earn, opportunity to grow, but most importantly, opportunity to serve. Make no mistake, these opportunities comes with a challenge. There are barriers plaguing us still today: racial, cultural, ideological. But there are big changes happening in the demographics of our country. The minority will become the majority in the not-too-distant future, and it won't be long before someone that looks like you will be standing here as the Chief of Naval Operations.

The great education you earned at Southern will help you face those challenges, to create your own opportunities to succeed. Just ask Southern University graduate, Sherian Grace Cadoria, who grew up toiling under the hot sun in Marksville Louisiana.

She would like to tell you her path was poorly paved. She probably would even say her career was tough. She faced discrimination for being both black and for being a woman. But with a solid education, her hard work and her persistence, she overcame her obstacles, and in 1985 Sherian became the first African-American woman to earn her star as an Army military police general.

And when she retired in 1990, she was the senior black female in the armed forces.

As for me, I arrived at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, a long time ago. And I grew up in a white middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles. I had very little exposure for the military, minorities, or to other cultures. That changed immediately when I arrived in Annapolis.

I connected with one of my classmates, another plebe – that’s what we call our freshman at the Naval Academy. We were different, polar opposites, it seems. Still we became fast friends and remain good friends today. He was from the other side of the country, Columbia South Carolina, an African American – a man who, unlike me, fully experienced pre-Civil Rights America.

Well, it turns out that we were more alike than we were different. We were both wearing our nation’s uniform, serving together. We were both just as clueless at the time of what we were doing and learning together. And we both wanted nothing more than to make it through the next day; struggling together. We both fought through four years at Annapolis helping each other to make it along the way, and we’ve enjoyed successful careers.

Two years ago, I had the privilege of becoming my navy’s senior officer. Not too long ago, Major General Charlie Bolden – the same Charlie Bolden, who ate the real food on campus –in Mayberry Hall– with “Real Dean” Dr. Robert Miller last spring, retired from the Marine Corps after an incredible career.

In an interview with Contemporary Black Biography, Charlie offered a glimpse of the obstacles he faced on his way to success. When I was a kid, Charlie said, all astronauts were male; all the astronauts were test pilots and all of the astronauts were white. I didn’t fit into most of those categories.

Well, Charlie blazed a trail. He earned both his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. As a bomber pilot, he flew more than a hundred missions over to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. He graduated from test pilot school, which is a common precursor to becoming an astronaut.

In fact, as a result of his performance, persistence, and education, Charlie was selected as an astronaut in 1980 and subsequently piloted four shuttle flights. No fabricated hindrance, no petty categories, were going to keep Charlie from achieving his own higher goal.

Charlie and I, Sherian and Carl, you here today, are all proof that in this country anyone with a commitment to do so can achieve great things, and can contribute as a thread in the fabric of our diversity. I truly believe in this.

And over many years in this uniform, I have galvanized my belief that our security, in fact, the strength of our nation is derived from the power of our diversity. Diversity of race, yes, but also of gender, thought, and culture. In the military and in business, in classrooms, in the halls of Congress, in institutions of education like this. And many voices, many minds, contrasting views, and healthy debates all contribute to our collective capability.

And that is why I am here today; because you, the young, educated, adventuresome leaders of the 21st century add to our diversity and have something to offer. And I want to see the world through your eyes, from your perspective. You have an amazing future ahead of you, and I'm excited for you.

I know it's been a long time since I've been on the receiving end of a commencement ceremony. I feel your pain. I can almost hear what is going on your head right now. "It's hot and muggy outside; thank goodness we're indoors. I wish everyone could see how good I look in this gown. Will this speech never end?"

I empathize with you. I can still remember being where you are today, nearly a thousand of us sitting side by side, tailbones fused to our cold metal chairs, convinced the alphabet had more than 26 letters. Anxious to get on with it. And then the ceremony was over. The Blue Angels roared overhead, and we threw our caps in the air, and that was it, we were done. So long to college joys and on to the great adventure of life.

I remember the day with fondness and I know you will too. I know time will –fade the memory of what I share with you today. Regardless of what you remember or what you forget, I urge you to leave this campus confident that you are ready for what lies ahead.

That is how I remember leaving my own graduation: confident. It wasn't that I thought I knew it all; I sure didn't; I still don't – but don't tell my sailors that. I was confident because like you, I knew I walked away with a solid education and I was fully committed to do what is right, do my best, and to serve; in short, to make a difference. And my commitment hasn't weakened.

Mark Twain once said, “Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.” But is it really that straightforward?

In truth, it may not be.

Discerning what is right is easy.

Check your gut; trust your instincts; listen to that inner voice.

But always doing the right thing is an entirely different matter.

Think about this: Can you be courteous in the face of an insult? Will you be harsh when your own treatment's, unkind? Can you be compassionate when cruelty finds you? And will you be upright, when you or those you love are victimized?

That is when you have to reach deep and take full measure of the content of your character. That is when you have to rely on your honor, your courage, your commitment, – core values that guide us in the Navy – and resolutely, persistently do the right thing.

And, folks, in the face of adversity, that is tough to do. That is life, and that is what you will face when you cross hump this afternoon.

As you leave campus today, look down the path ahead of you. Work hard; be persistent. Search for opportunities to prove your best to do your best, to serve, and always remember that in the words of Mahatma Gandhi: “What lies ahead of you and what lies behind you is nothing compared to what lies within you.”

So let your inner light shine and make your voices heard.

Which reminds of something Avery Johnson, head coach of the Dallas Mavericks, and a Southern University Jaguar remarked a couple of years ago. He said, you can't whisper the whole game.

He was referring to a motivational chastisement he gave his players when they were being crushed by the New York Knicks. The Mavericks won, by the way. That got me thinking – that's a profound statement that's a very important part of my message to you this morning.

Doing your best sometimes means standing up for what is right, making your voices heard, not just for yourselves, but for the world. I borrow from Martin Luther King when I say to you I don't want to give you the impression that it's going to be easy. There cannot be great social change without individual pain. But you are humanity's greatest treasure and our brightest hope. So in the face of

a trial, in the face of injustice, and in the face of tyranny, don't just cower and whisper. Stand up; make your voices heard. All eyes are on you, and the world is listening.

You are the ones who will fill the shoes of our rapidly disappearing World War II generation, the generation that defined itself with citizenship and service. So see yourselves that way and never lose an opportunity to listen, never pass up on the chance to learn, and never, ever pass up on an opportunity to lead.

I have faith and confidence in you. You have what it takes to make a difference, so go out there and do just that. Think globally, like Socrates did when he offered an international perspective and said, "I'm not Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world."

I encourage you to consider yourselves not just American or citizens of your own country, though that is very important, but also citizens of the world. Think about the widespread effects your actions can have, how far your e-mails and text messages can go in an instant, how your blogs and your YouTube videos can reach a worldwide audience, or how easily good or bad ideas can be exchanged across the globe. That is the world we live in: small, fast, sometimes dangerous.

And it's a world our enemies wants to change into one of intolerance, despotism and fear; controlled by privileged, and ideologically misguided few. I assure you that is the neither the future the world needs nor one we want, so don't accept it.

Instead, demand something better. Do not be indifferent. Strive for understanding, the kind of understanding that can only come from looking at the world through someone else's eyes. This means that you have to see beyond your individual –notions and close-held beliefs so that you can earnestly empathize with others. And then by your new found perspective, you know what you can do, how you can be, how you can serve to build a better world where every parent can raise a child free from the burden of fear.

It's a call to serve. How you respond is up to you. Life is a very precious gift, so don't waste it being unhappy, dissatisfied or anything less than you can be. Find a way to integrate your passions with your talents and have some fun along the way.

Kick off your shoes, have that cookout, build strong friendships, grow a family, do some traveling, and for goodness sakes, floss! But answer the call to serve.

You can serve in the Peace Corps, Doctors Without Borders, in Project Hope– or volunteer to help build a school in a faraway places like Afghanistan.

You can help your own community. You can volunteer to coach soccer, basketball, little league baseball, serve as a teacher or a coach, but most importantly, as a mentor.

Or you can follow in my footsteps on a path of service and duty. Just like your fellow graduates, Army cadets Jarvis Jackson and Stefan Wilson, and their colleagues in the Navy and Air Force ROTC program have done today.

Sure, get out there; maybe even make some money, if that is what is important to you. Leave your mark; be persistent. Make a difference. But remember, you didn't get here alone, and what you have learned here is not just your own. So think big, act big, and share it. Make that your generation's legacy. Good luck. Thanks for having me, and God bless the class of 2007.