

Remarks by
The Honorable BJ Penn
Secretary of the Navy (Acting)
Ester Boone Memorial Scholarship Awards Banquet
Bolling Air Force Base, Maryland
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Thank you and welcome.

To the future graduates, and soon to be college students, your recognition here tonight is well deserved. Seeing you here reminds me of a story about these guys I knew back in my college days...

Two seniors had a final exam coming up, but decided to slack off instead of studying. So when they went to the test, they decided to tell the professor that a flat tire caused their car to break down the night before, and they needed more time to study.

"A flat tire?" The professor said. "Ok, you may take the test tomorrow." That evening, both students crammed until they were fully prepared. Arriving to class the next morning, each was told to go to a separate classroom to take the exam. They shrugged, and went their separate ways. As each sat down, they opened their essay book and read the first and only question.

"For 100 points, tell me: which tire was it?"

Now that I think about it, I didn't see them at the graduation ceremony...

To the families here tonight, you should be proud of yourselves, and your student. Many of you are probably concerned that he or she will be going far away, never to return home. After all, that's what I thought when mine went off to college. But there's one thing that always keeps them coming back: it's called the National Bank of Mom and Dad.

How fortunate that this bank also does laundry and provides home-cooking.

I'd like to thank the sponsors with us tonight. Your support does so much to lift the hopes of our youth, and is greatly appreciated.

And finally, my most sincere thanks to Captain Tom Abernethy and the NNOA - an organization that helped me and countless others get to where we are today. Its been an incredible journey.

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Mine began on a Boy Scout trip to CA, where I watched the Blue Angels fly in awe. It was an amazing experience, especially for a high-schooler from Peru, Indiana.

When I found out people got paid to do that, I asked “where can I sign up?” Flying planes became my new dream.

But it wasn’t going to be that easy. The reality was that the job required skills I didn’t yet have.

I now realize why George Washington Carver once said: “Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.” Indeed, my dream was locked behind closed doors.

Like most black men growing up in the 1960s, I wasn’t born into a family with a lot of advantages.

We didn’t have much money - my father worked on the railroads for most of his life. He had to leave school in the 4th grade just to get his family through the depression.

What my parents *could* give me was love and encouragement. Perhaps their support of my higher education is what mattered most.

A degree from Purdue University provided me with a background in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, and equipped me with a foundation upon which I could rely in the Navy.

My dream became a reality when I began flight school shortly after graduation. Now the doors began to open.

You see, my college education gave me an advantage many people of color didn’t have back then, and it’s a vital part of what made me successful.

But I must warn you that I grew up in a different world, and a degree won’t give you the same advantage it gave me. In fact, 2/3s of all new jobs require advanced training or higher learning.

Therefore, a degree is no longer a pathway to opportunity; it’s merely a prerequisite for opportunity.

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The rising importance of education and academic excellence reflects the demands of a new world.

In the old world, success depended on your race, where you were born, what your family was worth or which language they spoke.

In that world, it took weeks to send a message, the news arrived once a day, and the best information was available only to those who could afford an encyclopedia. These barriers made it practically impossible to succeed if you weren't born with certain advantages.

Technology has changed everything.

Now, businesses are run anywhere with internet access, and the world is more interconnected than ever.

For example, when you call an airline to check the status of your bag, you may be talking with someone from India, capable of speaking perfect English. Of course, this doesn't change the fact that they don't actually have your bag – but perhaps some things will never change.

When you need to get a message to a friend halfway around the world, you can get on facebook to update your “status”.

And when you hear a song you like, you can download it to your i-pod in a matter of seconds, which is the same amount of time it would take my playlist to put you teenagers to sleep.

These revolutionary technologies have changed the way the world works.

New communication systems have broken down barriers which used to keep countries and communities apart. They have provided the masses with access to information and ideas previously available only to the fortunate few.

But with increased integration comes more and more competition for the best jobs - jobs that used to be available only to the affluent parts of America, and are now available to 7 billion people worldwide.

To succeed in this new world you must distinguish yourself. That is why a college degree is no longer optional. But you do have options.

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As we know, college is becoming more and more expensive. When I was enrolled at Purdue, I remember tuition was \$112 per semester. Many of you will spend 5 or 6 times that amount on books alone, while tuition at some schools is increasing by 10, even 15 percent annually. I don't know many people with incomes increasing so drastically.

By offsetting many of the costs associated with higher learning, the Navy, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard can get you started on a path to success. Let me be more specific.

In the Navy and Marine Corps, an NROTC scholarship will fund your way through college, and there are similar programs available in the Coast Guard. This financial aid can give you a leg up on your competition.

Not to mention, the Sea Services have some pretty cool responsibilities. If you've seen a map recently, you noticed a lot of blue on it. The Navy -Marine Corps - Coast Guard team is responsible for keeping that entire area safe.

To do this, we use the most cutting-edge technologies.

Last year when a dead satellite containing harmful materials was headed on a crash course with the earth, a team of experts shot it down from a Navy ship in the Pacific.

Media outlets said the shoot-down of that satellite was like hitting a bullet with another bullet. What an amazing capability!

The success of that mission required applied physics, math, engineering – many of the subjects you will be studying next year.

The systems used by today's Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard require scholars with advanced skills to make them work.

You see, a world-class education is not just required for you students to compete and win - it's that an educated workforce is essential for our Nation to keep pace with the rest of the world.

And by education I don't just mean four years at college. Indeed, this is not a sprint.

Rather, the pursuit of education is a marathon, and to stay up with the competition, you must commit yourselves to a lifetime of learning. Otherwise, you will be left in the dust.

The Navy made that easy for me by paying for degrees at Southern California, George Washington and Harvard – schools I never imagined attending before I joined.

The Navy does this because its most important ship - is scholarship.

And if you are struggling to make ends meet, there are programs in place to help get you through.

For example, I have had the opportunity to be a judge in the FIRST Robotics Competition, held in D.C. These young participants are perfect candidates for the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Scholarship Program, which has supplied close to 10 million dollars to students pursuing degrees in these fields.

Students like many of you with us tonight.

You are all amazing in your own ways, but there's one I'd like to briefly highlight. Now, she didn't know I was going to call her out like this, but this young woman's accomplishments are worthy of note.

A 4.0 student and member of her school's NJROTC program in Bladensburg, Maryland, Crystal Roach is on the path to success. She's a member of the National Honor Society, Math Honor Society, Science Honor Society, and English Honor Society. Are there any other Honor Societies we need to know about?

She has served our Navy well as a Supply Cadet, and next year she plans to study Chemical and Bio-molecular Engineering at Johns Hopkins.

Crystal, well done.

The country that best educates its next generations in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math will lead the world through the 21st Century. That's why these scholarships are so relevant, timely, and important.

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The vital question, then, is will America rise to the challenge?

The future of this Nation lies with each and every one of you.

So to the families here tonight: may you never retire from the job that matters most - investing in your children's education. While markets may rise and fall, an investment in their knowledge can never be taken away.

To the sponsors: may you continue to partner with the Sea Services, making college a reality for as many students as possible. And if you are hiring this summer, my hope is that you'll start by considering the students with us tonight.

To the members of the NNOA: May you be actively engaged in our youth. Scholarship funds are a great start, but you should also be going into the schools and ensuring that these kids are getting practical, life skills. They need mentors to teach ethics, integrity and manners, so they can fulfill their God-given potential in and out of the classroom. There's no better way to affect change.

And finally, to the students: You've overcome many obstacles, and we are so very proud of you. Now begins the next step in your adventure, and there are sure to be more distractions along the way.

The Bible warns, "I send you out as sheep among wolves." Watch out for the wolves.

They manifest themselves through things like video games, texting, alcohol and sheer laziness. Remember my college friends and their "flat tire"?

Don't let that be you.

When the history of our time is told, don't let it be said that you had the potential to be great and fell short. Rather, let it be said that you *were* great, and exceeded our wildest expectations.

You must also get the word out about these scholarships, and encourage next year's students to achieve as you have.

I know we are asking a lot of you. As one of my Commanding Officers used to ask me: "Are you writing all of this down?"

Regardless of whether your future includes service on a battleship or in the boardroom, these scholarships reaffirm our commitment to you.

Congratulations. You're our Nation's hope for a bright future.

God Bless you and God bless America.