

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Address to the Mississippi Legislature
Thursday, March 24, 2011

Speaker Billy McCoy, my friend, Cecil Brown, members of the Mississippi House and so many friends and fellow Mississippians, I am so happy to be home.

I want to introduce some folks before I get started. The Sailors and officers along both walls, I think you all have met them before, but they are part of the pre-commissioning crew of what is going to be the Navy's newest attack submarine, the *USS MISSISSIPPI*.

You know, being Secretary of the Navy is a pretty cool job and one of the best things you get to do is you get to name every ship that is launched on behalf of the United States Navy. And I'm not going to give away anything, but there may be a few more named for places in Mississippi before we're finished.

It's been almost 20 years since I stood in this spot and I appreciate, very much, your invitation to have me back here. While a lot has changed, most of our challenges remain exactly the same as they were two decades ago and while my role is different, my goal is not.

Across Mississippi, this is Navy week. Sailors and Marines are doing community service or talking to civic clubs and taking part in celebrations like a parade in Gulfport on Friday and air shows in Biloxi last weekend and this weekend in Meridian with the Blue Angels.

Mississippi and the Navy and Marine Corps have long and historic ties. Tens of thousands of Mississippians have donned our nation's colors and taken up service in her cause. Last year alone, 4200 young Mississippians joined the Navy or the Marine Corps. While the Seabees working around the world call Gulfport home, we train pilots at Meridian Naval Air Stations and build our service combatants, some of our DDGs, and all of our amphibious ships in Pascagoula.

Those contributions made by Mississippi and by people from all across this country have made the Navy and Marine Corps the most formidable expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known. The Navy and Marine Corps are America's "Away Team;" when we're doing our job, we're usually a long, long way from home. And every single day, around the clock, Sailors and Marines are working around the world in efforts ranging from major combat operations to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

At this hour in Japan, Marines from the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa, Sailors and Marines from the *REAGAN* and her strike group, the *ESSEX* Amphibious Ready Group with 2200 embarked Marines of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit are on station conducting relief operations after the tsunami and earthquake on March 11th. All told more than 20 ships and 10,000 Sailors and Marines are working to help Japan deal with this awful disaster.

On the other end of the spectrum, on the other side of the globe, Navy ships and submarines this past week have sent more than 150 Tomahawk cruise missiles against targets in Libya and they were followed up by combat sorties by Marine Harriers and Navy Electronic Attack aircraft enforcing the internationally approved no-fly zone.

Today, more than 20,000 Marines are in combat in Afghanistan. They are joined by thousands of Sailors, both at sea and on the ground. Those Sailors are doing everything from launching Strike Missions off the decks of ships in the Arabian Sea to building roads and doing reconstruction projects in the countryside.

Every one of those missions, wherever they occur around the world, have one purpose at its core - they're protecting us here at home, providing security and stability around the world.

I was deeply honored to be named by President Obama to be Secretary of the Navy. It is a great privilege to lead the Sailors and Marines who perform these astounding feats. I have been moved by their heroism, I have been inspired by their dedication, awed by their sacrifice, impressed by their skill and profoundly grateful for their willingness to serve.

As Secretary, my responsibility is to recruit, train and equip those Sailors and Marines to make sure that they have what they need to complete their mission.

The jobs that our Sailors and Marines do today are incredibly complex and incredibly technical, way more so than when I was in the Navy 40 years ago. Today's Sailor is a highly-skilled professional, and every single Marine and Sailor has to be able to work independently and understand the complex, geopolitical ramifications of his or her actions.

I've seen a lot of this firsthand. Several weeks ago I was in Coronado, California at BUD school - that's where we train the SEALs. I saw the physical training that they do and it made me tired just to watch those guys, but I also saw how much time SEAL candidates spend in the classroom, learning about topics like how to build a counterinsurgency campaign, but also how to do it ethically. When a SEAL finishes training, and only about 10 percent of those that start make it to the end, every one of them, their next stop is they take 12 weeks of language training. And every one of those SEALs is in the classroom over and over again during his career.

At Christmas this year, I was in Helmand Province, Afghanistan and I asked a Marine corporal how things were going. And he told me about the tribal relationships in the area, who was helping who, and what he had to do on patrols to keep his Marines safe and how to attack the local insurgent network. The Marines expect every, single corporal to be able to do this. It's what is known in the Corps as the "strategic corporal."

In our fleet, Sailors and Marines are called upon to fix and operate the world's most complicated and best anti-air and anti-missile systems, they're called on to hang ordnance on planes heading out for combat missions, or to operate, as these folks are going to do, the nuclear power plant on a submarine, as well as hundreds and hundreds of other missions and every one of those tasks does not just take intelligence, although that's crucial, they take the critical thinking that only a great education can give you. It is more clear now than ever that our nation's security depends not just on how strong we are, but on how smart we are.

Unfortunately, nationwide too many of our young people aren't ready to do that. In April 2010, a year ago, a group of retired military leaders released a report that revealed a really troubling and pretty startling fact: 75 percent, I'm going to repeat that number, 75 percent of young Americans are not qualified for military service because they do not meet the intellectual or physical requirements, or because they have a criminal record.

When three out of four Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 are not fit for military service, what does that mean for the future of this country? Now there are a lot of causes for this, a lot of factors we can point to, but one thing is clear: as a society we are failing to adequately prepare our children for adulthood, failing to teach them appropriate life skills and failing to provide them with tools they are going to need in this global economy.

The three factors I have described affect every aspect of our society. Obesity is a public health and economic issue, because as we get older, overweight Americans experience a lot more medical issues and use a disproportionate amount of our health care system, which causes the costs for everybody to go up. First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama has highlighted this issue with her Let's Move campaign, aimed at assisting a lot of efforts to help people make the right choices for themselves and for their children.

The second factor that this report identified, having a criminal record is directly related to economic opportunity, and that is directly related to education. The less educated you are, the fewer opportunities you are going to have and that is a fact.

These days, you cannot join the United States military without a high school diploma, but nearly a third of American kids don't graduate from high school on time. That is a dangerous trend and one that cannot sustain American leadership in the world.

Twenty years ago when I stood before you as governor, I said we cannot allow our children to fall behind because there were fewer and fewer jobs for strong backs and weak minds. It was true then, way truer today because we're not competing against Alabama or New York, or California, we're competing against Singapore and South Korea and Germany. And I have to tell you, we're not doing any better at it. In fact we're going the wrong way. In December, a report was released that said we had fallen to 14th place in world education ratings and our educational system was rated average. The United State should never, ever accept being average at anything.

As a country, we still have the best universities doing the best research - I met some of the leaders of our great Mississippi universities in the hallway coming in here - but our edge is slipping. And if you want to call it what it is, the failing of too many elementary and high school education programs and the lack of quality early childhood programs means that fewer and fewer students in those great, graduate programs, particularly in areas like math and science, engineering and technology, fewer and fewer of those are American. More and more of those students are from places like India and China and they will take home that great education to help fuel their economies, not ours.

Now I have to tell you, I understand the financial situation facing Mississippi and the rest of the states and the country as a whole. In fact I've said that it is my fond hope, one that will not be realized, that someday I can go into government when there is enough money to do the things we need to do.

In the Pentagon, we are constantly looking to try to make things more efficient and looking at every single program. It has to perform and it has to perform on budget or risk being cancelled. In fact, very recently we cancelled a major program that's been going on since 1988, the Marine's Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, because we didn't need it and we couldn't afford it. It would have taken about half the Marine budget for all their equipment to build about 2 percent of their vehicles; simply not a good investment. We have already started developing a less expensive, more reasonable option which will do the jobs the Marines need to get done. We have to watch our spending, we have to watch every dollar and we have to get a good return on any investment we make.

But tight budgets cannot be used as a justification for poor education, they just can't. Education programs, like all programs, ought to be accountable for the results they produce. But we all know, that if it's done right, education produces huge dividends and brings enormous results.

We in Defense know that we have to make hard choices and set some priorities so that we have the means to pay for the things our servicemen and women need to do their missions. For the protective gear they need to keep themselves safe, for the care they and their families need while they serve, or when they are wounded or injured in the service of our country.

It is no different in education. Whatever hard choices have to be made; whatever priorities have to be set, we simply have to give every child the ability to compete. The stakes could not be higher. We cannot, we will not remain a great country unless the generations who follow us are highly educated and very healthy.

This is not about politics, this is not about partisanship, this is about patriotism. It's about our ability to sustain our economy, it's about our ability to maintain the technological edge we need in the military and everywhere else, and it's about the assurance of the survival of our freedom.

Virtually everybody in America wants to support our men and women in the armed forces. They want to help those who serve and who protect us and who protect our precious rights. You here in this room, in this building have the ability to do just that. Three out of four, three out of four young people cannot qualify to serve our country in the military today. You can make sure, by the actions you take, that every young Mississippian has the ability to serve whether in the military or in some other way America needs.

I want to thank everybody here for your willingness to serve, for your willingness to do public service and for the support you have shown time after time to the people in the Navy and the Marine Corps and all the people we have in uniform today. They and this country need you now more than they ever have.

In the two decades since I stood here, our young people are less prepared; not better. But in the same time, the world has gotten more complex and other countries haven't stood still and the bar to success and achievement has been raised a lot higher.

One thing I know, one thing I'm confident of is, we can do this. I'm absolutely convinced of that because I see it every day. I see it in the Sailors and Marines in our Fleet. But it can't be, it just can't be that only one in four measures up. It can't be that three in four just do not qualify.

Just as the Navy and Marine Corps are the greatest expeditionary fighting force that we've ever had in the world, they're that because of their education, they're that because of their training, because of their dedication, their flexibility, their adaptability to meet any challenge that comes at them; we are a great and unparalleled country because of exactly the same qualities.

This is not just about the military. Less than 1 percent of Americans wear the uniform of our country today. But the military, in so many ways, shows what America is at our very best.

America needs all its children to be able to make it; it needs all of every generation to defend it in its hour of need and it needs all our young people to be able to serve and contribute.

Our children deserve it; our national security demands it; America will not continue to be the shining beacon of greatness that we are without it.

From the Navy; Semper Fortis – forever strong; from the Marines: Semper Fidelis – forever faithful. Thank you. Godspeed.