

The Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
University of Virginia Commencement
17 May 2014

Thank you so much for that introduction. President Sullivan, members of the board, visitors, and most of all, to the Class of 2014. This is a great honor for me to be here and I just want to thank you for giving me this opportunity.

The first class started here in 1825. And you know what that means – they’ve almost paid off their student loans. My favorite University of Virginia story, I think, was when Professor William “Reddy” Echols, in trying to stop the fire that gutted the Rotunda, threw 100 pounds of dynamite on the flames. It concerns me that he was a professor. We think of them having superior knowledge and experience. I looked up what he taught – it was math. I had pretty much ruled out science or chemistry of any sort.

This is not the first time I’ve had the honor to speak at Virginia or walk The Lawn. The first time happened when I was governor and President George H.W. Bush convened all 50 of the nation’s governors here in Charlottesville. And we started here and walked The Lawn to the Rotunda – 50 governors and the President. And I think the fact that this university of all universities in the country was picked for this unique and historic meeting of all the governors and the President to discuss education shows the regard this university is held in and its place in American history.

From its very earliest days, you've been one of the nation's finest, after all, what else can you expect from Mr. Jefferson's school. It remains in that elite today. It's a testament to the faculty, the staff, the skill, the dedication, the excellence and talent of everybody sitting here today, students, friends, and supporters.

Now to the Class of 2014: Congratulations to you. As you take your degree today, you have earned it. You've put in the time; you have made the effort; you have done the work. But I'm going to say what the first two speakers said, remember, you couldn't be here without a whole lot of other people.

Behind every single one of you are parents and grandparents, siblings, teachers, coaches, friends, mentors. Hundreds and hundreds of people, many of whom you probably don't even know, don't even realize the role they played, who made this accomplishment possible.

Now, as the Rector said, after the ceremony – and I know you're going to do this because you were going to do it anyway, and you were going to do it because the Rector advised it, but I'm going to pile on that advisement – give them a hug. Thank them one more time. There are certain things you can't have too many of – hugs is one of them. Ice cream falls in that category, too. Thank them for what they've done, because in a very real way, today is their day also.

It's also important to remember those who in a larger sense make days like today possible.

Those who have worn and are wearing the uniform of our country; those who stand the watch around the world and keep us safe and secure.

The Grounds here at the University of Virginia have been home to students as wide ranging as Woodrow Wilson, Edgar Allen Poe, and Tina Fey. Two of my predecessors as Secretary of the Navy, Hilary Herbert and Graham Claytor, sat where you sit.

From the military, Rear Admiral Richard Byrd, who was a pioneer of naval aviation and explorer of both Poles, went to school here before he moved to the U.S. Naval Academy. So did Fleet Admiral William “Bull” Halsey, who helped lead our Navy and Marine Corps across the Pacific in World War II. And the 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps Alexander Vandegrift, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his leadership in the Solomon Islands campaign, went here as well.

These military greats from your history were truly extraordinary. But so, too, are all who serve this country today.

Every single person, just as professional, just as dedicated, just as skilled as those heroes of our past. We ought to be incredibly grateful to all those who've made the choice to defend this unique and great country, because less than one percent – one percent – of America wears the uniform today. One percent to protect the other 99 percent of us; one percent who have volunteered and given freely of their time and of themselves for years and years; one percent who have sacrificed day after day.

They are the 6000 Marines in Afghanistan today. They are the almost 40,000 deployed around the world from central Africa, to the islands of the Pacific, to the shores of the Black Sea.

They are the thousands of Sailors on the 100 ships of our fleet which are forward deployed today from the coasts of Europe, to the Middle East, to the South China Sea to Northeast Asia. They are the soldiers and airmen in Korea and Germany. They are the Coast Guardsmen in the frigid waters of the Arctic.

They went to Indonesia after the Christmas Tsunami, they went to Louisiana and Mississippi after Katrina, they went to Japan after the Sendai Tsunami, to Haiti after the earthquake, to New York and New Jersey after Sandy, and this past winter to the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan. They are your friends, they are your brothers, and they are your sisters, whether you know them or not. They are making a difference; they are doing something for others; they are doing something beyond themselves.

They have endured hardships and family separations, and have undertaken an incredibly high pace of operations for the past 13 years we have been at war. Thousands have paid the ultimate price of their lives. Tens of thousands more have come home with scars, both visible and invisible, which they will bear with them until their final day.

Those who have served and are serving are here today in many roles, as proud grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, family members and friends. Some are sitting with you as graduates and fellow students who came back here on the GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon

program. I was honored yesterday to commission ROTC graduates in all our services, who from the next link in that unbroken chain. I'd like to take a minute as Memorial Day approaches a week from today, to recognize the veterans who have served or are serving, regardless of when or where you served. Stand up, wave and let us thank you for what you've done.

The question I want to ask you graduates is will you join them? Will you serve? Will you be a part of one of the hallmarks of this great university – service? Now I'm not saying, and I certainly hope that you don't have to, risk your life. Although we need skilled and dedicated people protecting this country, the military is far from the only way to serve. There are quiet acts of heroism that go on every single day. It's the act of a teacher, staying after school to help a struggling student. [cheers from a group of graduates] And who do not get paid enough to do it. It's the act of a nurse [cheers from a group of graduates] – who also don't get paid enough to do it – I'm saying that as someone who married a nurse. But it's the nurse staying on after the shift is over to comfort the patient. It's the act of mowing the grass of an elderly neighbor without being asked. Or it's the act of a father putting people through college without ever telling his family.

That last thing happened to a close friend of mine who found out that her father had put dozens of people through college only at his funeral when those people came up to her to tell her how much her father had changed their lives.

It is the service that matters. It's the service to our fellow Americans; it's the service to those in need all over the world. I hope that I learned that in my own life. I graduated from Ole Miss in

1969, at the height of the Cold War and Vietnam. I learned as a 21 year old Naval Officer what it means to be part of a team with lives at stake. I learned that the actions that I took could have reverberations the next watch, the next day, and maybe the next year.

So do something outside yourself, do something to make a difference, to give back to this unique nation we are privileged to call home. Do something to help people who may never know you did it, or who may never know you. Do something that is not just about you or your advancement.

Now there is nothing wrong with making money. [cheers from a group of graduates] I assume that's the business school. There is nothing wrong with seeing how far you can go in your chosen field or profession. There is nothing wrong and a lot right with looking after yourself and your family.

But, at the end of your life, it's not going to be the money or the stuff that you accumulate. I personally have never seen a hearse with a U-Haul. The important things will be the people you've touched, the lives you've made better, and the futures you have made brighter.

I am privileged to lead the Navy and Marine Corps, the greatest expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known, and one of the best things I get to do is talk to veterans.

Earlier this year I was in the Marshall Islands, a series of tiny atolls in the middle of the Pacific. Seventy years ago a task force of Marines and Sailors landed there during the march across the

Pacific. Standing under the rusting guns that are still mounted in the positions along that beach, I was reminded of how costly that one battle was.

While I was there I had the honor to have dinner with a group of veterans who had traveled half way across the world to remember what they accomplished there, and remember the friends they left there.

Every one of these veterans told me how important their service was, how important it was to them to do something big – to make a difference. They remembered their service like it was yesterday, and in seven decades it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people who aren't veterans, but remember the two years they spent teaching when they were young, or the time they spent getting something they cared about started or put into action, or the trip that they made and how they helped build a school or a hospital, or a future for others.

One thing is very certain as you go into a very uncertain world: There is no end of things that need doing. We are nearing the end of a generation that earned the title of “The Greatest Generation;” that survived the depression and won World War II, came back to build the strongest nation the world has ever known. You have exactly the same opportunity to become a greatest generation, lauded for your accomplishments 60 or 70 or 80 years from now.

But to do it, you're going to have to do something that will last. It doesn't need to be the Marine Corps – but, like a lot of graduates from this school, take a look at the Peace Corps. You don't have to run for office, but vote and get passionately interested and involved in the events of your time. Whether they are political or not, don't let them pass you by. Get involved in your school, your community, your city, your state, or your nation. Get involved in your world. The Greatest Generation changed that whole world. They made it better – and that's your opportunity, too.

Finally, I hope that you will do something that you will not see the results of, maybe ever. My father Raymond E. Mabus Sr., was a member of the Greatest Generation, and he was a tree farmer in Ackerman, Mississippi. [Audience clapping] We have somebody from Ackerman, Mississippi here. This really is quite a school.

My dad died when he was eighty-five years old after a great life. In the last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. Now he knew for an absolute fact he would not see any money from those trees. He knew with an absolute fact that he would never see them grow and mature. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never get one bit of benefit from those trees. But he did it anyway. He did it as a matter of hope. He did it as a matter of faith. He did it for me, and he did it for his granddaughters that he never met. And he did it for the generations of my family that will never know him, and that he would never know.

Cherish this day, cherish your graduation, because you've earned it. But when this day is over, go out and earn some things that will be cherished long after this day is gone and long after we are all gone.

It's your turn. It's your life. Tomorrow – ask yourself, what trees am I going to plant?

Thank you.