

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
University of Tennessee College of Law Hooding Ceremony
Knoxville, Tennessee
Friday, 11 May 2012

Dean Blaze, thank you so much for that introduction.

Chancellor, Mr. President, faculty, family, friends – most of all, the Class of 2012 of the University of Tennessee College of Law, it's a real honor for me to be invited to speak, and I want to thank you for allowing me to be here tonight.

This is the most fun and the nicest reception I've ever gotten at UT. And I'm pretty sure I'm going away from here tonight without an “L” – without a loss in the column.

This college of law, as it has been since the first classes were held in 1890, is one of the finest law schools in this nation, particularly in its clinical training. Hands-on training is such an important part of your legal education because the theory you have gained here has to be put into some practical use. Having that opportunity while you're still in school is a great benefit of attending UT Law.

I'm going to say a little bit more about this later, but that evaluation comes, as Dean Blaze says, from an Ole Miss graduate and a Harvard Law School alum. This is the only time you'll ever hear me say, "Good old Rocky Top."

I have been a recovering lawyer for three and a half decades. And even though I only practiced for a few years after law school, the critical thinking skills that I gained in law have served me really well in whatever job I've had, and I know they will serve you equally well. That's a testament to both the skill and the talent of your faculty, but also to the efforts of every graduate here tonight.

I wish my time here wasn't so short. I'd like to stop by and make sure there's a fresh coat of paint on The Rock, congratulating this group, because this is your day. Congratulations on reaching this day, on getting this accomplishment.

You've earned it. You've put in the time; you've put in the effort. You are here because of merit. But you couldn't be here without a whole lot of other people. You're not sitting here today just because of the work you did in the classroom.

Behind every single one of you are moms and dads and brothers and sisters and grandparents and spouses, friends and teachers, coaches, and hundreds and hundreds of other people you may not even know, helped you get from torch night to tonight.

And I know you're going to do this, but after the ceremony, take a little extra time and give them a hug, and thank them for what they've done to make sure that tonight happens, because today, in a very real sense, is their day, too.

It's also very important to remember those who in a larger sense have made days like today possible. Last week marked the one-year anniversary of the joint operation led by a Navy SEAL team that brought the worst terrorist on Earth to justice. And while the events of the Osama bin Laden raid are truly extraordinary and were conducted by some of our greatest warriors, those warriors are not alone.

Tens of thousands of Americans wear the uniform of this country, and every single one of them is just as professional, just as dedicated, just as skilled as the people who carried out that mission, and we ought to be just as proud of every one of them.

We should be grateful to all those who made the choice to put on the uniform of America, because less than one percent of this country wears that uniform – one percent protecting the other 99 percent of us, one percent who have sacrificed and who have given freely of themselves for years and years.

They've endured hardships, they've endured family separations; they've endured an incredibly high operational tempo during the decade that we have been at war. Tonight, in this place, there are eight graduates who have served or continue to serve in the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Army. So I want to personally thank them for your service, and thank this university for its dedicated support of the 430 veterans currently on this campus. Thank you.

I'm incredibly fortunate to be the civilian leader of the Navy and the Marine Corps, and as Dean Blaze said, it's a cool job, and I do get to name every ship.

And I want to point out that my confidential assistant, Jennifer Scarbrough who sits right outside my office and who I have known now for four years, who has the dedication, the passion, the interests of this country always in the forefront, is a graduate of the University of Tennessee.

There is a tense week every fall in the office and she has lobbied on behalf of naming things after the state of Tennessee. But I'm too late – we already have a USS Tennessee, we already have several other ships named for cities and people in Tennessee. But when I get the opportunity, I will do something about that.

But for the past three years, and I've only been in office three years next week, I've had the opportunity to see the dedication, the commitment, the service over and over again of our Sailors and our Marines. I've met thousands of them, from the front lines of Afghanistan to the jungles of Malaysia, all around the world.

Every single one of them is doing extraordinary things every single day to protect our country and to make sure we have the freedom to live days like today.

One example, and this one's special to me, is that today at this very moment we have 18,500 Marines on the ground in Afghanistan in combat. We have 20,000 Sailors on the ground and at sea supporting that fight. Together, they are consolidating gains in stability and security throughout Helmand Province, where they are focused, but beyond, in order to promote good education, good governments – economic development for Afghanistan.

Graduates and faculty from the University of Tennessee and this great state have been part of our nation's effort in this war as they have been part of our nation's effort in every war dating back to the War of 1812. Our military is an all-volunteer force and can succeed only when men and women step forward for a call to service, like generations have done before in this the Volunteer State.

But volunteering and service can't be and isn't just about the military. It means so many other things, so many ways you can make our country better.

After World War II, the University of Tennessee welcomed back its share of the 16 million Americans who wore the uniform during that war, and as they returned, a lot of them went to college on the GI bill. They expanded their horizons; they got a chance at a better life.

It is the reason so many in this class are here tonight. This school, and so many others across the country, had student bodies created and composed of members of the greatest generation, people who literally saved our country. Born around the '20s, they grew up during the Depression, they went off and won World War II, they were tested and tried at places like Casablanca and Guadalcanal, Anzio and Iwo Jima, Normandy, Midway. Their lives saw more and they experienced more than most of us can even imagine, and then they came back and changed America.

I want to tell you a quick story about one of them, a fellow Mississippian of mine named Jack Lucas.

Jack Lucas lied about his age and joined the Marine Corps at 14. He made it through boot camp and he made it all the way to Hawaii when they found out how old he really was, and they separated him from his unit and told him he was going to go home because he was too young.

So Jack Lucas stowed away on the first ship he saw. He didn't know where it was going. Turned out it was going to an island named Iwo Jima. By the time they found Jack Lucas, it was way too late, and he went ashore with his unit in one of the first waves there.

His unit came under attack and two grenades came into his position. He grabbed them both and fell on them. Iwo Jima is a volcanic island, and the sand there is very fine, black volcanic sand. He took both grenades and shoved them as far down into the sand as he could.

They both went off, and he was hurt pretty badly. His unit thought he was killed. When a corpsman came by and patched him up, Jack Lucas went home, and then he went to the White

House, where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. And then he went back to Mississippi, where he started the ninth grade.

There are literally thousands of stories like Jack Lucas,' and you here today are the inheritors of that legacy, of those stories, of that heritage. You are the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the descendants of the greatest generation, and your generation has exactly the same potential to change America and to change the world.

What you do and whether your legacy will be held up as an example 50, 60, 70 years from now is up to you, because there is one thing certain as you head into a very uncertain world – there is no end of things that need doing.

We need you to take your law degrees and make a difference in a wide variety of ways and help protect what is right and what is needed for our society to continue forward. That's what our Navy lawyers – both civilians and Judge Advocates General – are doing around the world today.

They are protecting the gains we make in energy independence. They're playing a pivotal role in the Navy's very successful transition away from Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and they're providing the very best legal advice to our Sailors, Marines and their families, from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa, to our ships at sea, and in the rings of the Pentagon.

As I've said before, some of your generation have already made a choice and shown their willingness to serve and to wear the uniform of this country, and the question I've got tonight is, how are you going to join them?

I have a certain bias and perspective toward the military, but I want to be really clear – I'm not saying that you need to or even ought to go into the military to do good and to help this country, even though we need skilled and dedicated people in the military.

But by choosing to get a law degree, you have in a lot of ways already chosen the path of public service, helping to ensure that average, everyday Americans get justice. That everyone is equal before the law. It is a great way to serve, and it comes with significant personal rewards.

There are acts of quiet heroism that go on day after day. It's the lawyer doing legal assistance work. It's the teacher staying after school to help a student who's struggling. It's the nurse, staying on long after her shift is done, to stay with a patient.

It's a neighbor mowing the yard of an elderly friend, or it's a farmer from Mississippi anonymously putting people through college without telling anyone, including his own family.

So what I'm asking every one of you to do is do something outside yourself, something bigger than yourself. Do something to give back to this unique country of ours. Do something to help people that you may never know and who will probably never know what you did. Do something that is not just about you or your advancement.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with making money, and there is nothing wrong with being a success in this your chosen profession. And there's nothing wrong and a lot right about taking good care of yourself and your family. But at the end of your life, the most important things aren't going to be the money or the stuff that you accumulate. I've never seen a hearse with a U-Haul.

The important things will be the people you've touched, the lives you've made better, the futures you have made brighter. One thing I want to say, just to you new attorneys – too many lawyers are known for saying no. It can be a way around responsibility. No is always the safest answer. It's usually the easiest answer, and sometimes it's the right one.

But you've also got to know when saying no just doesn't cut it, and when you have to work harder to find the legal and ethical way to say yes, to figure out a way to do something that needs doing inside the law.

In terms of service, as I said, I get to do a lot of great things in this job. One of them is to talk to groups of veterans. I went to a ship's reunion of the USS Stephen Potter, a World War II destroyer commissioned in 1943. The ship went to sea in 1943 and didn't come back until the war was over. They got 12 battle stars in 18 months.

They survived submarine and kamikaze attacks. Every single one of those Sailors, all of them are at least in their eighties now, told me how important their service was, how important it was for them to make a difference. They remembered their service like it was yesterday, and after almost 70 years it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people who may not be veterans but who remember the two years they spent teaching, or the time they spent working in a nursing home, or the mission trip they made to build a hospital or a school to give people a better shot at tomorrow.

Or people who, like recent graduates from this program, serve organizations dedicated to making their community or their state or their country or the world better. It's not what you do; it's the service that matters.

I hope I learned a little bit of that in my own life. When I graduated from Ole Miss in 1969, the Cold War and Vietnam were both at their height, and I learned as a 22-year-old naval officer - and I was the most dangerous thing in the U.S. military, I was a junior officer - I learned what it means to be part of a team, to be on a ship at sea and to learn that what I did would have implications that went way past the next watch or the next day.

So do something that'll last in your life. Doesn't have to be the Marine Corps, it could be the Peace Corps. You don't have to run for office, but vote. Don't let the issues of your day pass you by. Be involved, get passionate about it. Get involved in your school, in your community, in your church, in your state, in your country.

The greatest generation changed America and they changed the world. They made it a lot better. And you have exactly the same opportunity. We need your head, we need your hands, we need your heart, we need your help.

I hope you'll do something that you don't see the results of right away. My dad, who died at the age of 85 in 1986 and is buried less than three miles from where he was born, was a member of that greatest generation. His birthday was last week, and he would have been 111, had he lived. He owned the hardware store in Ackerman, Mississippi, and he grew trees for a living.

The last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands, and he did that with the absolute certainty that he would never get one bit of benefit from a single one of those trees.

He did it as an act of faith. He did it as an act of hope. He did it for his granddaughters that he never met. He did it for future generations of my family that I will never meet. He did it for the future of us all.

So I want you to cherish today. Celebrate this graduation because you have absolutely earned it. But when it's over, when you turn in your cap and gown, you go and do some things that will be cherished long after today is gone. Commit an act of faith. Commit an act of hope. Decide what things will be cherished by others when you're gone. Decide what trees you'll plant on Rocky Top and beyond.

Congratulations. It's your day.