

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
University of Georgia Commencement
Athens, GA
Friday, May 13, 2011

President Mike Adams, thank you so much for that wonderful, wonderful introduction. To the faculty, family, friends here tonight and most of all the University of Georgia Class of 2011. It is a real honor for me to be invited to speak here tonight, and I want to thank you again for allowing me to do it. As President Adams said, he and I have been good friends for a long time, ever since I gave the first commencement address when he was President of Centre College. Now I know that he has grown in wisdom and stature since then. I hope my speechmaking ability has grown slightly as well. I can't say enough good things about Mike Adams, but I also can't say enough good things about what you are doing here at Georgia.

Georgia, as it has been since the first classes were held in 1801, is one of the very best universities in this country. I'm going to say a little bit more about this later, but that evaluation comes from an Ole Miss graduate. That is a testament to both the skill and the talent of your faculty but also the efforts of every student here tonight.

For me, as President Adams said, today is a little bit bittersweet, because it is the first time in over 50 years that a Secretary of the Navy has come to Athens absent the presence of the Navy Supply School. Athens was such a wonderful partner for the Navy, and as I said at the official transfer ceremony last year, I know that the campus here, which is incorporated into the Georgia Health Sciences University, is being taken care of in a wonderful way and will produce physicians and medical professionals for the state of Georgia and our country.

President Adams, I also want you to know that the Bulldog statue that was out in front of the Naval Supply School has a new and colder home in Newport, RI. It has pride of place, as does the miniature statue of UGA that President Adams gave me for my office. That statue of UGA is right outside the main door to my office. As former Governor of Mississippi and an Ole Miss graduate, it is kind of like dogs and cats trying to live together peacefully. But because of my own history I have to make sure I move it anytime anyone from Mississippi comes to visit. And I have to say, this is the most enjoyable day I have spent between the hedges ever.

For those of you graduating today, great congratulations. Congratulations on reaching this day, this accomplishment, this pinnacle, you have earned it. You have put in the time, you put in the effort. You are here because of your merit. This is your day. But as President Adams said, you could not be here without a lot of other people. You are not sitting here today just because of the work you did in the classroom.

Behind every single one of you are moms and dads, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and teachers, coaches and hundreds and hundreds of people you may not even know helped you get to this day. After the ceremony – and I know you're going to do this - take a little while to thank those that you can. Give them a hug. Take time to remember what they have done. Because in a very real way, today is their day, too.

It is also really important to remember those who in a larger sense have made days like today possible. Like you, two weeks ago, I watched the President's announcement and gave thanks to the brave men and women of our Armed Forces for what they did to bring the worst terrorist in the world to justice. Most of you who are graduating today were in middle school when 9/11 happened, so for you, this conflict and this world is what you've grown up with.

And while the events of May 1st are truly extraordinary, and those who conducted that raid are some of our greatest warriors, they are not alone. Tens of thousands of Americans wear the uniform of this country, and every single one of them is just as professional, every single one of them is just as dedicated as the people who carried out that mission. We ought to be just as proud of every one of them. That the people who serve in uniform made the choice to serve is something we all should all be grateful for, because less than 1 percent of America wears the uniform of this nation. One percent protects the other 99 percent of us. One percent who have sacrificed and who have given freely of themselves for years and years.

I am incredibly fortunate to be the civilian leader of the Navy and Marine Corps, and over the past two years that I've been in office I've had the opportunity to see this dedication, this commitment, over and over again. I've met thousands of Sailors and Marines on the front lines and serving all around the world. Every single one of them is sacrificing; every single one of them is doing extraordinary things to protect our country and make sure we have the freedom to live days like today.

An example that is special to me, is that right now, this very minute in Afghanistan, there are 20,000 Marines in combat and almost 20,000 Sailors at sea and on the ground supporting the fight. Together they are consolidating gains in stability and security throughout Helmand Province in order to promote education, good governance, and economic development.

Graduates and faculty from University of Georgia have been part of our nation's effort in Afghanistan as they have been part of our nation's effort in every war since we have become a country. One of them, current journalism Professor and Navy reserve Lieutenant Kaye Sweetser is right now deployed to Afghanistan. So this is probably the only time I'll ever say this, this is for you, Kaye, Go Dawgs! She is joined by so many others who have sat where you sit, who have been part of the recent relief efforts in Haiti and Japan, the wars stretching back to our independence, deploying time and time again in service to this country. Some of them don't come back; they have paid the ultimate price for our freedom. They are your friends, they are your brothers and your sisters, whether you know them or not. They are making a difference; they are doing something for others, they are doing something bigger than themselves.

Some of you sitting in front of me right now have been or will soon be defending our country. This year 25 cadets from ROTC here at Georgia will be commissioned into the Army and Air Force. So I want to thank Georgia for its commitment to things like ROTC, for its commitment to our veterans, to our military; for its commitment in ways like the Carl Vinson Institute here and its connection to the aircraft carrier that played such an important role in the mission of two weeks ago; the strong commitment of the University of Georgia to acts of service that underpins so much of what happens here.

But service is not just about the military. Service means so many things, and there are so many ways you can make our country better. After World War II, University of Georgia welcomed back a lot of the 16 million people who served in the war. As they returned a lot of them wanted to go to college using the GI Bill, to expand their horizons and get a chance at a better life. It is the reason most of you are here tonight.

This school, and so many others across the country, created a student body composed of the Greatest Generation, people who literally saved our country. They were born in the '20s, they grew up during the depression, they won World War II, they were tried and tested at places like Casablanca and Guadalcanal, Anzio and Iwo Jima, Normandy and Midway. Their lives saw more and they experienced more than most of us can even imagine, and they came back to change America.

I want to tell you a quick story about one of them, a fellow Mississippian of mine. Jack Lucas lied about his age and joined the Marine Corps in World War II at the age of 14. And he made it all the way through boot camp and made it to Hawaii before the Marines found out about him. They separated him from his unit and said, you're going home, you're too young. Jack Lucas stowed away on the first ship he could; he didn't know where it was going. It was headed for a place called Iwo Jima. By the time they found Jack, it was too late so he went ashore in one of the first waves. His unit came under attack and two grenades came in. Jack Lucas grabbed them both. Now Iwo Jima is a volcanic island and the sand is very fine, black volcanic sand. He jammed both of the grenades deep into the sand, they both exploded, and he was hurt pretty badly. His unit thought he was killed. A corpsman found him and got him out to sea and he got patched up. After he recovered, he came back and went to the White House where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then he returned home and started the 9th grade.

Now there are thousands of stories like Jack Lucas and you are the inheritors of that legacy, of those stories, of that heritage. You are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Greatest Generation. Your generation has exactly the same potential to change America and to change the world as that generation did. What you do and whether your legacy will be held up 50, 60, or 70 years from now is up to you today. 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 teachers educated here at University of Georgia to create the leaders of the generations to follow. We need scientists from University of Georgia to help create new fuels that will break our dependence on foreign oil. We need doctors and medical professionals from the Health Sciences University and the School of Public Health to heal the ill and injured in our country, and we need biologists, we need ecologists, and we need natural resource managers from the Franklin, Odum and Warnell schools to heal our planet from the harm of our own excess.

A lot of your generation have already made their choice and shown their willingness to do this by wearing the uniform of this country. The question I have for you tonight is how are you going to join them? I know I have a certain perspective and bias towards military service, but I want to be clear: I'm not saying that you have to go into the military to do good even though we need skilled and dedicated people defending this

country. There are other very quiet acts of heroism that go on day after day. It's a teacher, staying after school with a student who's struggling. It's the nurse, staying on after a shift is long over to stay with a patient. It's a neighbor, mowing the yard of an elderly friend without being asked. It's a farmer anonymously putting people through college without telling anyone, including his own family.

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

There is nothing wrong with making money. And there is nothing wrong with seeing being a success in your chosen profession. And there is nothing wrong and a lot right with taking care of yourself and your family, but at the end of your life, the most important things are not going to be the money or the stuff that you accumulate. I 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 that you have made brighter.

I get to do a lot of great things in this job, and one of them is to talk to veterans. A few months ago I went to a ship's reunion of the USS *Stephen Potter*, a WWII destroyer that was commissioned in 1943. There were four plankowners there. A plankowner is somebody from the original crew of that ship. That ship went to sea in 1943 and did not come back until the war was over. They had 12 battle stars in 18 months. They braved submarine and kamikaze attacks. Every single one of those Sailors, who are now in their 80s, told me how important their service was, how important it was to them to make a difference, to do something bigger than themselves. They remembered their service like it was yesterday and after 68 years it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people who aren't 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 school to give people a brighter future.

It's not what you do; it is the service that matters. I hope I learned that in my own life. I graduated from Ole Miss in 1969, when the Cold War and Vietnam were both at their height. I learned as a 22-year-old naval officer what it means to be a part of a team on a ship at sea. What I did could have ramifications that lasted far beyond the next watch.

Do something in your life that will last. It doesn't have to be the Marine Corps – but maybe 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. Get involved and be passionate about it. Get involved in your school; get involved in your community, your state, your country. The Greatest Generation I talked about changed America and they changed the world. They made it a lot better and you have exactly the same opportunity. The world needs your head, your hands, your heart and your help.

I hope you'll do something that you don't see the results of the next day or maybe ever. My father was a member of that Greatest Generation. His birthday was last week and had he been alive, he would have been 110 years old. He earned his living in a hardware store in Ackerman, Mississippi and he grew trees for a living. He died in 1986

when he was 85 years old. That last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted tens of thousands. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never see those trees grow. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never get any benefit those trees. He knew for an absolute fact that he would be long gone before anything happened. He did it as an act of hope. He did it as an act of faith. He did it for granddaughters he never met and he did it for future generations of my family. He did it for the future of us all. He did it out of hope. He did it out of faith.

I want you to cherish this day, this graduation, you've earned it. But when it's over; when the fireworks die down, you've turned in your cap and gown, go out and earn some things that will be cherished long after you've gone. Commit an act of faith. Commit an act of hope. Decide what things will be cherished by others after you're gone. Decide what trees you will plant.

Congratulations. It's your day.