

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
University of Southern Mississippi Commencement
Hattiesburg, MS
Friday, May 13, 2011

Dr. Martha Saunders, thank you for that introduction. Provost Lyman, faculty, family, friends and most of all the graduates, Class of 2011, of the University of Southern Mississippi.

I'm going to require some participation a couple of times in this speech and I just wanted to give you a head's up. So, Southern Miss, To the Top. I think that is maybe the best slogan I've ever heard – To the Top.

I've been impressed with Southern since I was Governor and I had the chance to visit here a lot. I continue to be impressed by what Southern is doing today. Southern has done so much to become a great research institution. It is a testament to the strength of your faculty and the effort of every single student here.

Second, and as President Saunders said, this is pretty personal, I want to thank the entire university for your commitment to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Throughout my life I've spent countless weeks on the Coast. And as the President said, I was honored last summer to go back to the Coast on behalf of President Obama, putting together the long-term recovery plan. Over the summer, I did hundreds of events and met with thousands of citizens, and with dozens of researchers and scientists and a whole lot of them were from here. From all those conversations, it's clear what you've done. It's clear just how important your research and the effort that you've made has been for the oil spill. And it's clear what the Campus on the Gulf Coast means to the Coast. Southern Miss, To the Top.

For those of you sitting here today and graduating, congratulations. Congratulations on reaching this day, because if you are sitting here getting ready to graduate, you have earned it. But I hope that you appreciate you wouldn't have gotten here by yourself. You are not sitting here today just because of what you did in the classroom. You could not have made it without help from a lot of other people.

Behind every person here today are moms and dads, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and teachers, coaches and hundreds and hundreds of other people who have had an impact on you that you may never know. Take a little while after this ceremony to thank them; to give them a hug; to recognize what they have done for you. Take time to remember that this, in a real way, is their day, too.

I just want you to think just for a minute those who in a larger sense have made all this possible. Just like you, I watched the President's announcement almost two weeks ago 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. A lot of the graduates here today were in middle school when 9/11 happened, so for you, this conflict and this world is what you've grown up in.

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

I am very proud and extremely fortunate to be the civilian leader of the Navy and Marine Corps, and over the past two years I've had the opportunity to see this commitment to service of Sailors and Marines first-hand, all over the world. I've met with thousands of them serving on the front lines and in every place in the world you can imagine. Every single one of them is doing extraordinary things to protect our country and make sure we have the freedom to do things like today.

For example, right now, today, there are 20,000 Marines in combat in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, and almost 20,000 Sailors afloat and ashore supporting that fight. Together they are consolidating some of the gains made in stability and security throughout that province in order to promote education, economic development and good governance. When they leave, they will leave behind a more functioning region that respects the rule of law.

Southern graduates have been part of every effort America's military has ever made. They have been part of Afghanistan. They've been part of the recent relief efforts in Haiti and Japan, part of everything the military does, deploying with every one of the services again and again over the years to protect our country. Some of them have paid the ultimate price. 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, something beyond themselves.

Some of you sitting here today have already been in service of this country, and some of you are about to join them. This year, 17 cadets from ROTC will be commissioned in the Army and Air Force. So I want to thank Southern and particularly those who have made it through the ROTC program, for your commitment to the military. Your partnership here with this university, with Stennis Space Center and Keesler Air Force Base, and the strong commitment to national service underpins so much of what you do.

But service is not just about the military. Service means a whole lot of things. There are a lot of ways you can make our country better. There are a lot of ways you can make Mississippi better. Service to country and to this state was one of the founding principles of this university. One hundred and one years ago, in 1910, the school that became Southern was founded here in Hattiesburg as a teacher training college. Today that commitment to education still holds true; more than half the teachers in Mississippi schools were educated here at Southern. In just a few months, dozens of you will be standing alone and unafraid in one of the scariest places I can imagine: a classroom full of eight year olds.

That initial dedication to service here at Southern carried on after World War II, when this university and so many others welcomed back some of the 16 million people who served in World War II. As they returned a lot of them wanted to go to college to expand their horizons and become more successful. That's the reason so many of you are here today, too.

This school, and so many others, after the war created a student body composed of what's been known as the Greatest Generation, people who had literally saved our country. Those members of the first post-war classes here at Southern grew up during the depression, 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 ever imagine, and they came back from the war to change America.

I want to tell you a quick story about one of them, a guy named Jack Lucas who lived a large part of his life here in Hattiesburg. He died only a couple of years ago. He was 14 years old in World War II when he joined the Marine Corps. He lied about his age. And he made it all the way through boot camp and to Hawaii when the Marines found out exactly how old he was. They separated him from his unit and told him they were sending him home. Jack Lucas stowed away on the first ship he could. He didn't know where it was going just knew he didn't want to go home. That ship was going to Iwo Jima. By the time they found Jack Lucas, it was too late to do anything about it so he went ashore in one of the first waves to attack Iwo Jima. His unit came under attack and two grenades came into his position. Jack Lucas grabbed them both and fell on them. The sand in Iwo Jima is very fine, volcanic, black sand. He took both grenades and jammed them a long way down into the sand, both blew up, and he was hurt really badly. The people in his unit thought he was dead. A corpsman found him, patched him up and sent him back out to the Fleet. Eventually he made his way back to the United States and went to the White House where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then he went back home and started the 9th grade.

The Jack Lucas' of this world are the legacy that you are inheriting today. You are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Greatest Generation. But this generation, your generation, has the potential to change America and to change the world just like they did. What you do with this opportunity, what you do with their legacy, whether you will be the next Greatest Generation and whether your deeds will be held up 50, 60, or 70 years from now is up to you. Because one thing is certain as you head into an uncertain world – there is no end of things that need doing.

We need teachers educated here at Southern to create the leaders of the generations that follow you. We need nurses and health professionals from Southern to heal the ill and injured of our country and we need biologists and marine scientists from Southern to heal our planet from the harm of our own excess.

Many of your generation have already made this choice and shown their willingness to serve by wearing the uniform of this country. The question is, how are you going to join them?

I know I have a sort of unique perspective and a bias towards the military, but let me be clear: I'm not saying that you have to go into the military to do good. We need skilled and dedicated people defending this country, but the military is far from the only

way to serve. There are a lot of quiet acts of heroism that go on day after day. It's a teacher, staying after school to help a student who's struggling. It's a nurse, staying a lot longer after the shift is over to be with a patient. It's a neighbor, mowing the grass of his elderly friend next door without being asked. It's a farmer here in Mississippi who anonymously put people through college without ever telling anyone, even his own family.

What I'm asking you to do is something outside yourself, to do something bigger, do something to make a difference, do something to give back to this unique country of ours. Do something to help people you may never know and they won't know what you did to help them. Do something that is not just about you and your advancement.

There is nothing, nothing at all wrong with making money. And there is nothing wrong with seeing how far you can go in your chosen profession. And there is absolutely nothing wrong and a lot right with looking after yourself and after your family, but at the end of your life, the most important things aren't going to be the money or the stuff you've accumulated. I have never seen a hearse with a U-Haul. The important things are the people you've touched, the lives you've made better and the futures that you have made brighter.

One of the great things I get to do in this job 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 who was in the original crew of the ship. They went to war in 1943 and didn't come back until the war was over. They earned 12 battle stars in a year and a half, braving submarine attacks and kamikazes along the way. Every one of those Sailors, every single one, told me how important their service was, how important it was to them to do something bigger and to make a difference in the world. They remembered their service like it was yesterday and after 68 years it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also get to meet a lot of people who aren't veterans, but who remember the two years they spent teaching after college, or the time they spent working in a nursing home, or the mission trip they took to build a school or a hospital 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 college in 1969, when the Cold War and Vietnam were both at their height. I learned as a 22-year-old naval officer on a ship at sea what it means to be a part of a team. I learned that what I did could have ramifications far beyond the next watch.

Do something in your life that will last. It doesn't have to be the Marine Corps – it can be the Peace Corps. You don't have to run for office, but vote. Get passionately involved with the events of your time. Don't be passive and don't let them pass you by. Get involved in your school, in your community, your state, your country, your world. The Greatest Generation I've spoken about changed the world. They made it a lot better and you sitting here today have exactly the same opportunity. The world needs your heart, your hands, and your help.

And finally, 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 the Greatest Generation. His birthday

was last week. If he had lived he would have been 110 years old. He earned his living at a hardware store and growing trees in Ackerman, Mississippi. He died in 1986 at the age of 85. In the last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. He did that with the absolute knowledge that he would never see the benefit of a single tree. With the absolute knowledge that he would be long gone when those trees were grown. But he did it as an act of hope. He did it as an act of faith. He did it for his granddaughters that he never met. He did it for their children and their children.

Cherish your day, cherish your graduation. But when the day is over, go out and earn some things that folks will cherish long after you've gone. Commit your own act of hope. Commit your own act of faith. Decide the things that will be cherished after you're here. Decide what trees you will plant in your life.

It's your turn. Southern Miss – To the Top. Thank you.