

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus  
Secretary of the Navy  
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I am the father of three members of Generation Z. I have a 21-year-old daughter, Elisabeth; a 19-year-old daughter, Annie; and a 10-year-old daughter, Kate. I don't know if you realize just how tough North Carolina schools are, but my oldest daughter applied to a school in North Carolina when she was looking at colleges – and I'm not going to tell you which one, because there are so many great schools of higher education in North Carolina. But it was the first response that she got back, and she was wait-listed. And she was in tears. She's going to graduate in May, with honors, from Harvard.

But I watched those three daughters growing up, and just in their age difference – there was an 11-year gap between Elisabeth and Kate – you can see a generational difference. Elisabeth approaches technology, computers and smartphones, a little bit like I do. It's a tool, but it's only that. For Kate, it's just a part of life. It's iPads and smartphones, and it's something that has always been there. And it changes her way of looking at the world, it changes all of our ways of looking at the world.

I am particularly happy to be in North Carolina in this job, one of the top five states in military population. And I'm going to talk about Generation Z, but I can never pass up the opportunity to talk about our Navy and Marine Corps to tell you some of the things those amazing men and women are doing for our country.

We're beginning now to pivot away from 10 years of very hard, but pretty effective ground combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. You are all very aware, because of the military here in North Carolina, but across the country, of the sacrifices that our Sailors, our Marines, our soldiers, our airmen, our Coast Guardsmen have made and the sacrifices that their families have made.

Whatever has been asked of our Navy and Marine Corps team by the President on behalf of the American people, from Afghanistan to Libya from assisting the stricken people of Japan to making sure that the sea lanes are open around the world, from bringing Osama bin Laden to final justice to bringing the hostages from wherever they may be hidden by pirates or terrorists, the Navy and Marine Corps get the mission done. They answer the call.

The Navy and Marine Corps are the most formidable expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known. They have a 236-year period of doing this, and they will continue to do it for the next 236 years, Generation Z and beyond.

When you look at the world today, it appears to be getting smaller. It appears to be spinning faster. It appears to be more and more different, but in some ways that the Navy and the Marine Corps are very aware of, our history is our future.

The 70-80-90 rule – 70 percent of the world’s surface covered by water; 80 percent of the world’s population living along the water; and 90 percent of the world’s trade moving by the water – those numbers – the last two, the 80 percent and 90 percent – will probably increase. So what happens on the water, what happens in the great oceans and seas matter. It matters to our economy, it matters to our national security, it matters to the preservation of American jobs.

As we wind down from these 10 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have to reconsider what the American military has done. We’ve had to take a look at our defense structure and take a look at our priorities. We’ve got to do this regardless of the budgetary situation, but with different national interests because we need to be good stewards of public money, because of the need for military to participate in shrinking how much we spend, because a strong American economy is one of the great building blocks of our national defense.

So led by the President of the United States himself, who came to meetings, who participated in these strategy sessions, handled by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, working with all of the service chiefs and all the members of the Joint Chiefs, we developed a new defense strategy. Understandably it focuses on two areas of the world: the Western Pacific and the Middle East. But it also calls for a global presence using innovative, low-cost, small-footprint engagements. It calls for making sure that we keep the global commons open for everybody. It calls on us to be great in the air, on land; on, above, under the world’s oceans; and in the vast cyber sea. This strategy requires a forward-looking, ready-for-anything, incredibly well-trained Navy and Marine Corps.

Our global responsibilities are significant now, and they’re likely only to increase in the future, and that’s why we’re building the force for 2020.

The impact upon our Navy of two ground wars in the last 10 years is absolutely unmistakable. On 9/11, the Navy battle fleet stood at 316 ships. When I came in eight years later, we had fallen to 278. One of my top priorities has been rebuilding the fleet, renewing that Navy of the future.

Now, the ships we have today are far more capable than any ships we’ve ever had, and comparing them to the old fleet in terms of numbers is sort of like comparing iPhones to the telegraph. But quantity has a quality all its own if you want capability. And we are rebuilding that fleet. Today we have 285 ships in the battle fleet, and by the end of this decade, we will have risen to 300 or more.

Now, I served in the Navy over 40 years ago. I served on cruisers, and I served with some great people. We couldn’t touch the force of today, but there were a thousand people on that first cruiser. And there were jobs that were not high-tech jobs. Chipping and painting was not a high-tech job. Hauling the lines was not a high-tech job. And I couldn’t say that I, or anybody else, was particularly technologically savvy. We still took – even though we had some electronic means of doing things - we still found our position by taking the sunrise and stars and plotting them.

Today the newest ship we have, a littoral combat ship, has a crew of 40, but it has far more capabilities than my ship with a crew of a hundred did 40 years – with a crew of a thousand did 40 years ago. And so what it means is that Generation Z will be called upon, those that enter the Navy or the Marine Corps, to command very technologically advanced ships and systems, weapons. We don't have any room for strong backs and weak minds. There are no jobs in the military for that.

And we have to take the long view about this, too. The midshipman who was up here right before me, Midshipman Reider, could command one of the ships we're building today if he stays in the Navy. And the last captain of the ships we're building today probably has not been born yet. Our Navy ships sail the waters for between 30 and 50 years. So the ships we build today, we have to be able to upgrade, change technology, and the people who command them, who run them, the commanders, have to be flexible, technologically way ahead of the curve.

The jobs that our Sailors and Marines do are incredibly complex and they don't know what they're going to face from day-to-day. I try to talk to every strike group commander and amphibious ready group commander before they go out to sea. And one of the things I say, the only thing certain about your mission over the next six or seven or, for the USS Bataan, 11 months – they're coming in this week – over these next months, the only thing I can tell you with certainty is you will face something unexpected. You will face something you have not prepared for, you have not planned for, but you will be forced to fall back on your intelligence, on your training, on your skill. The USS Ronald Reagan Striker Group was headed to close air support over Afghanistan for our Marines and our soldiers when the tsunami hit Japan. They turned right around and went to Japan, using the same techniques, using the same platforms, the same aircraft. They made sure that the right things got on the right aircraft going to the right place and were incredibly effective helping after that devastating natural disaster. And then when they finished that, they turned again and completed their mission over Afghanistan.

But the jobs of our citizen Marines aren't just technologically complex. They require critical thinking skills, too. Our Sailors and Marines have to know where they are and why they're there and what they're doing, what their job is and how it advances American security. And I'll give you a couple of examples.

You've been reading a lot in the last year about our SEALs, and I couldn't be more proud of a group of people.

I'm going to say this as an aside, before I get into it. As skilled, as trained, as ready, as calm as those SEALs are, that's what our entire Navy and Marine Corps is. There's nobody that's not that way. There's nobody who's not that skilled.

Now, the SEALs have some special attributes, and they are more physically fit than almost anybody I know. And they're called upon to do very specialized, very different sort of work, but so is everybody in the military.

I went to BUDS – the school in Coronado, California, where our SEAL recruits go through training, and I saw some of that physical training. I'm 63 years old. I couldn't have done that when I was 23, or any age in my life. And 80 percent of the people who start don't finish, in every class. You've heard that. What I thought was more interesting is when that 20 percent makes it and they get called a SEAL, the first thing they do is go to 12 weeks of language school. And then in their career – whether that career lasts for five years or 30 years – they will spend about half their time the classroom. They will not only learn about the things you think about, weapons and tactics; they will learn about ethics and geopolitics.

They are warriors in every sense of the word. And they have the ability to be everything from a diplomat to the most lethal person in the world, they're that well-trained, but they're that well-educated, too.

The second example, because I've noticed it in Afghanistan several times, and every time I go there, I try to spend as much time as I can talking with Marines. And I always get to eat virtually every meal with the Marines. If any of you all ever go, I'll give you one little heads-up. It's 120 degrees in a couple of provinces in the summertime. Don't get the barbecue. I'm not going to tell you why, just don't do it.

But on one of my first trips there, I was sitting, talking to a Marine corporal. And I asked him – I just said: How are things going? And he proceeded to explain to me some of the history of Afghanistan. He told me about tribal relationships in the area. He told me what he and his fellow squad mates had to do on patrol to stay safe, and what the local insurgent network problems looked like. The Marines call this a strategic corporal. Every corporal in the Marine Corps has to know what his job is, for example, why we're doing it, what it means to the bigger picture – the strategic corporal.

In our fleet, Sailors and Marines are called upon to operate and fix some of the most complex technology on Earth; whether it's an aircraft carrier with 5,000 people on it or an unmanned vehicle being remotely piloted from somewhere far away. They're called upon to go under the polar ice cap. They're called upon to do hundreds and hundreds of other missions. And as I said, every one of those requires not just the training and not just the design; it requires capability.

Governor Hunt mentioned the number of young people in North Carolina. I'll give you a nationwide number that ought to make you worry a lot. Three out of four Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 cannot qualify for our military, 75 percent. Seventy-five percent of our young people, men and women, cannot qualify for the honor of defending this country. There are three reasons.

One that Governor Hunt mentioned: obesity. The toll that obesity is taking on public health and on the economy is staggering. The first lady, Michelle Obama, has highlighted this issue with her *Let's Move* campaign and with nutrition and with talking about ways to be more active and more fit.

The second reason is a criminal record. We're not going to let you in if you've got a criminal record. We give no waivers for that. Long gone are the days when I was an ensign, and judges would give folks a choice between going to jail and joining the Navy. So again, young people, because of a lack of opportunity or because of lack of education, because of whatever reason, get a criminal record. They're not going to be part of our military.

But the third reason is education. You will not join the Navy or Marine Corps or any other part of the American military without a high school diploma. Again, we don't give any waivers for this. You have to have that diploma before we'll talk to you.

And nobody has made education a higher priority than Jim Hunt. I've been talking about education for 25 years now, Jim Hunt for far longer than that. In this world today, Mississippi has got to compete against North Carolina. We're both competing against Singapore, Germany, and countries that are on the rise that a lot of Americans can't find on a map. The bad news is, we're not doing very well. Nationwide, more than 30 percent of Americans do not graduate from high school on time.

Now, I would argue that you cannot remain a great country forever if you're losing 30 percent of diplomas. And you certainly cannot maintain the world's greatest military if 3 out of 4 don't qualify.

A report was released about a year ago that said we have fallen to 14 in world education. And it said America's education system could be described as average. America should never settle for being average in anything, but particularly in education.

Now you all know we in the Pentagon are working every day. We cut \$487 billion out of our defense budget over the next 10 years. You have to perform well, a program has to do well, or it's going to be cancelled. We're trying to be more efficient in everything we do. We have to watch our spending, we have to be careful with every dollar, and we have to get a good return on investments. But tight budgets can never be a justification for poor education. They just can't. Education and its programs, like every program, needs to be accountable for results, but all of us, every one of us, knows that if it's done right, the dividends that a great education brings you are enormous.

I'll give you one example of something we're doing in the Navy, beginning to do with our students. Our Office of Naval Research, which is one of the great research institutions that nobody's ever heard of. There are Nobel Prize winners supported by ONR. They get more patents than almost anybody else. But they've come up with something of a digital tool. Now, usually I'm not spending a whole lot of time in front of video games, but ONR has developed a 3D video that allows people to drive ships, fight fires, respond to floods onboard, fly aircraft, long before they board their first ship or even their first aircraft. And the results are pretty amazing. There's a one-third reduction in cost and time that it takes to learn material. And there are 50 percent fewer errors, and they're retaining information four times as long. And it's a program that has worked wonders for our Sailors, and we're beginning to work to apply that same underlying technology to help high school students master mathematics. And we're not doing this just to be good citizens. We need those math skills in the Navy and the Marine Corps.

And it's not just the military. Fewer than 1 percent of America wears the uniform of America. It's about a hundred percent of America that our military could save. It's about remaining a great country. It's not about politics. It's not about partisanship. It's about patriotism. It's about doing what's right. It's about our goal to sustain our economy. It's about assuring our freedom. And virtually everybody you meet – everybody I meet wants to support the United States military, wants to support our men and women in uniform.

Well, you here in this room have the ability to do just that. Make sure everybody finishes high school. Make sure the obesity epidemic that we have is reversed. Make sure that people have the opportunity to be in the armed forces of the United States of America.

One thing that I am absolutely confident about is, we can do this. I'm convinced of that because of what I see every day come through in our Sailors and Marines. I see it in the eyes of my three daughters, and I see it in people like Midshipman Reider and the other members of Generation Z. The next generation and the Navy are linked. We both see the world for its possibilities.

Just as the Navy and Marine Corps are the greatest expeditionary fighting force that we have ever seen, they are that because of their education, they are that because of their training and dedication and flexibility, and their adaptability to meet any challenge that comes at them. We are a great country because of exactly the same qualities that the Navy and Marine Corps have.

It sometimes takes somebody from outside to really bring America into focus. I hosted the president of Georgia, of the country in the Caucasus, not the one to the southwest here. Last Friday at the Naval Academy – he had been in Washington most of the week; he saw the president, the vice president, the leaders of Congress, but he wanted to go see Annapolis because he had four midshipmen there. And he got on this boat with a brigade of midshipmen. And in Annapolis, all 4,400 midshipmen gather at the same time.

The president looked at the midshipmen, and said he's confident about their military always. He said the importance of America is the idea of America, the idea that democracy and freedom and work. It's the idea that we are willing to help protect the world, the idea that we don't just open the sea lanes for our own ships but for all ships, the idea that we are willing to go in to do humanitarian assistance and disaster relief for people who have suffered, the idea that we are willing to do the medical and veterinary and dental work in South America and Africa and the South Pacific.

We have to continue to be the world's greatest expeditionary fighting force, but we also have to continue to be representative of the idea of America. For most people in the world, the only America they will ever see is a Sailor or a Marine. We are America's away team; when we are doing our job, we're a long way from home.

And so, in the words of the great Marine Corps motto, *semper fidelis*. Always faithful. Thank you all.