

University of Michigan College of Engineering
Commencement Ceremony
Lansing, Michigan
Saturday – April 28, 2007

Dean Munson, proud parents, relieved teachers, and even more relieved graduates of the University of Michigan's College of Engineering, thank you for inviting me back to my alma mater to congratulate the class of 2007.

As I was leaving Washington, and I mentioned to some colleagues that I was going to be speaking at this event, one of them said to me, "I bet you're glad to be speaking to engineers—finally an audience that might actually understand the way you think."

And that got me thinking . . .

Who are the people easiest to deal with in my job—is it really the engineers?

Well, let's consider the alternatives.

There are, of course, the lawyers—there are quite a number of them in Washington, DC and at the Pentagon.

But no, I would not put them at the top of the list of people who are easy to deal with.

Then there are the accountants and budget people—we've sure got plenty of those in the Department of the Navy.

But no, they are always telling me no, you have to cut this, you can't afford that.

And there are the program managers.

No, they're always telling me what's going wrong with various programs—mainly everyone else's programs . . .

There are the public affairs people.

No, they never come to me with good news, and they are always telling me you can't say this, and you can't say that.

Then, there are the business types.

Well, between us, let's face it—these are the people who couldn't make it through engineering school . . .

So, obviously, dealing with them can be frustrating.

Of course, there are all the uniformed Sailors and Marines in service of our country.

Yes, I really do like dealing with them, but they are always telling me sea stories and other tales of adventure that just serve to make me think that I am missing out on an exciting ride.

And that leaves the engineers.

Now, if you are a Dilbert reader—all truly well-rounded people are—you know that engineers are the only smart ones in the bunch.

But here's the problem with engineers.

Now this is not a state secret, but I do not think it has ever been discussed previously outside the Pentagon—

There comes a time at some point in the development of a program, after years and years of engineer-led research, and prototypes, and tinkering, where one is literally forced to finally say, “Stop! Stop the engineer and just build the damn thing!”

The interesting point here is the surprise among the engineers—some of whom never seem to recognize that eventually, well . . . you know.

OK, maybe I exaggerate a little bit—I do love engineering and I greatly value all our engineers, working to bring to fruition projects that are so many years in the making.

And so it is good to be among engineers, with freshly minted degrees, all of which are the fruit of long years of study and perseverance.

Today's achievement, which you will now carry with you for the rest of your lives, is an important milestone in your careers, and one that you will always treasure.

To the Americans among you, you live in a country that, perhaps more than any other, rewards achievement, and offers endless opportunities to those who seize them.

To the many students representing more than 90 different countries among you, you have enriched us by your attendance here, and I hope that your welcome on these grounds has been as warm as the good wishes I extend to you today.

This school has benefited, and America has benefited, from the intellectual wealth you have brought to our shores—thank you for being part of the extraordinary American story.

My message today applies to you too—the large and impressive contingent of international students here today—but it is mainly addressed to those students who not only live in this country, but participate, either by birth or by choice, as citizens of it.

That message is simply this—a call to service.

Four and a half decades ago, when a youthful President Kennedy called on Americans to “pay any price, to bear any burden” in the service of liberty, and exhorted his fellow citizens to ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country, he captivated a nation.

Later that year, that same president, on these very grounds, also issued a call to service, leading to the establishment of the Peace Corps, an avenue by which young idealists could serve their nation by going abroad with their talents, their energy, and their goodwill.

Many heeded that call to service.

Looking back at their lives, decades later, few have ever regretted their choice to serve—whether in the Peace Corps, in government, or in our military.

Young graduates in those days, having been awarded the parchment for their years of academic toil, proclaimed their eagerness to go out and “change the world.”

Today, however, it is often said that we live in a cynical age.

Perhaps.

But America is still a deeply idealistic country, and we Americans still go through life thinking that our destiny is not written in the stars, and that we have the power to chart our own course in life.

Indeed, we do.

And, in fact, young graduates today still leave the graduation stage with fervent hopes and boundless optimism in their power to change the world.

The clarion call to service 46 years ago fell on many receptive ears.

That call still does so today.

I call on you to serve—to serve something larger than yourselves—your family, your community, your nation.

I suspect that few of you realize just how valuable your contributions to our society can be as you advance in your careers.

Just consider this somewhat startling fact from the historical record:

Engineers have been more responsible than doctors for the dramatic increase in life expectancy we have seen in America over the past century.

Yes, even more than the medical advances that this century has brought us.

How can that be, you might ask?

To illustrate, let's take a look at the work of just one field—civil engineering.

In 1900, the male life expectancy in the U.S. was 48 years.

There were 10 miles of concrete road.

1 in 7 homes had a bathtub.

1 in 13 had a telephone.

Over the last century, the work of civil engineers has dramatically improved the lives of ordinary people.

Clean water delivered to every home was a major breakthrough, and had a huge impact.

Sewage treatment improved sanitation conditions enormously, reducing the threat of disease and raising the level of cleanliness generally.

Paved roads, trucks, refrigeration, and modern infrastructure brought fresh, clean food to every household at affordable prices.

The net impact of these efforts has been an increase in the average life expectancy from 48 to 74 years.

That is no small achievement—although few think about or realize the role of engineers in bringing it about.

The truth is, engineering is a noble profession, and by working as an engineer, you can serve your fellow man and your community.

Whether you use your knowledge of engineering in the private sector, or in government, your career will likely involve productive activities that can greatly benefit society.

But my call to service goes beyond that.

In addition to your work as valued, productive members of society, you will have an opportunity to find other ways of doing good, of giving back, of making your passage on earth one that others will point to with gratitude.

One way to do so is through volunteer work.

There is a long history in the United States of a spirit of volunteerism, a characteristic of American society that deeply impressed Alexis de Tocqueville more than a century and a half ago.

Americans still look to De Tocqueville as the most insightful observer of the American character and of American ways.

On the subject of our extraordinary tendency to volunteer, to join clubs, and to organize civic groups that participate in activities of all kinds, De Tocqueville wrote:

"Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations . . . In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others."

That was true about us in the 1830's, and it remains true today in communities large and small across this land.

A huge percentage of the community-based and professional-based organizations in this country depend on volunteers to operate.

The great majority of those associations carry no financial rewards—none whatsoever.

In fact, I suspect that most of those actually carry costs associated with the hours of volunteering that support them.

But for many people, their participation in volunteer work is one of the most rewarding aspects of their lives.

I urge you to consider making volunteer work an important part of your lives.

Now, the desire to serve - give even more meaning to one's life through service - can overtake a person in unexpected ways, and at various stages in life.

As you begin your journey down this new road in your life, there will be events that will cause you to step back, re-evaluate, and decide to explore different paths.

In my own case, a series of traumatic events in my life led me to re-assess my place in the world, eventually leading me to heed the call of service that has resulted in my standing before you today.

9/11 affected me profoundly.

Most Americans were deeply shocked and saddened by the events of 9/11.

I grew up just outside New York City, and a number of people I have known since childhood were lost during the attacks.

Less than two years later, 10 people in my company were killed and more than 60 were wounded in Saudi Arabia during terrorist attacks in Riyadh.

I arrived on the scene shortly afterwards, and saw what had happened to my employees and to their families.

It was very hard to see this happen to people I knew.

But consoling their families both in Riyadh and back home was even harder.

I wanted to do something, but I did not know what.

That was my life-changing event, my call to service.

I owed it to those innocent people who were killed, and I owed it to my country—a country that is the very symbol of hope and opportunity to millions around the world—to serve.

And not just as a part-time volunteer.

The choice that I made to leave the private sector and enter government service has changed my life.

I can honestly say that the past 16 months in my current job have been the most satisfying and the most rewarding time of my life—and not by the most common, outward measures.

My sense of satisfaction stems from working with Sailors and Marines who serve their country with the most unabashed patriotism, devotion, and courage that it would be impossible *not* to feel humbled by their examples of service.

It's hard to fully appreciate the heroism and the sacrifice of those who serve in uniform, who put their lives on the line for their country, and who are simply proud to have an opportunity to serve.

My admiration for them has only grown with time, and they inspire me daily.

From the corpsmen on the hospital ship MERCY on a humanitarian mission to Indonesia, to the Sailors on Navy ships protecting shipping lanes in international waters, to Marines on the ground in Iraq trying to bring peace to a troubled land, all of them make me feel honored to belong to an organization dedicated to answering the nation's call to service.

There are milestones and turning points in all of our lives.

And today is a big one in yours.

But there will be many more to follow.

It is my hope that in your individual passages in life, some of the turning points along the way will lead you to serve your nation and your community in ways you had not considered before.

None of us is required to serve.

We live in a country in which it is possible to live quite well, enjoying all the rights and opportunities America has to offer, without ever having to worry much about the responsibilities that come with them.

As graduates of a top university, with a degree in one of the most demanding fields, and with knowledge that will lead to successful careers, you do not have to serve.

My call to service can safely be ignored.

But someday, you might want to re-consider.

Someday, you might just remember that a life well-lived, a truly satisfying career, and a meaningful journey across the years may lie in choosing the path of service.

Today, all of us stand on the shoulders of those who have served, who have built this great country, and have left us with an opportunity to enjoy the blessings of liberty.

I hope you will all build upon those blessings and lend your talents to a great and worthy cause—by answering the call to service.

Congratulations to all of you; good luck, and best wishes in your future endeavors.

Go Blue!