

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Mississippi State University Commencement
Saturday, 12 May 2012

President Keenum, thank you so much.

I'm very glad to be here. To the faculty and the staff, the families and friends, and most of all to the Mississippi State University Class of 2012. You ought to cheer for that.

Now, I know that I went to school a little north of here but I want to establish my Mississippi state bona fides right now. I was born in Starkville, Mississippi, at Eckford Clinic, and my family and I ate Sunday lunch at the church cafeteria virtually my entire life until I left to go to the military.

I learned a lifelong love of ice cream from the old dairy bar right next to the cafeteria. I came to every high school event, Ackerman High School, up here. And the first university I went to was Mississippi State.

You had a program then for high school juniors called the "Summer Program for Academically Talented Students, or SPATS. And I came and got 12 hours of Mississippi State University credit that your sister school to the north was glad to accept.

Now, I want you to pay very close attention, because this is probably the only time you'll ever see me do this. Go, Dawgs.

Mississippi State as it has been, since the very first students arrived here in 1880, is one of the finest universities in the United States of America, and that comes from an Ole Miss graduate. That's testament not only to the skill and the talent of your faculty, but also the efforts of everybody sitting here today.

Congratulations to you. You've done the work, you've made the effort, you've put in the time, and even though my thunder got stolen a little bit earlier, you couldn't be here without a whole lot of other people.

Behind every single one of you are the folks that stood up – mothers and daddies and grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends, coaches, teachers. Hundreds and hundreds of other people, a lot of them you may not even know, who made today possible.

After the ceremony – and I know you're going to do this anyway, but give them an extra hug. Thank them one more time for what they've done, because in a real way, this is your day as much as it is the graduates' day.

It's also important to remember those who in a much larger sense make days like today possible. I'm talking about those who have worn and are wearing the uniform of our country, those who stand the watch every day to keep us safe and secure.

Last week marked the one-year anniversary of the joint operation led by Navy SEALs that brought the world's worst terrorist to justice. Most of you who are graduating today were in middle school or younger when that happened, and so this conflict that started on 9/11, this is the world you've grown up in.

And while those warriors who conducted the Osama bin Laden raid were truly extraordinary, so are all who serve this country today – every single person who wears the cloth of this country.

Every single person, 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 single one of them. We ought to be grateful to all those who've made the choice to defend this unique and great country, because less than one percent – one percent – of America wears the uniform of America. One percent to protect the other 99 percent of us; one percent who have volunteered and given freely of themselves for years and years and years, and who have sacrificed day after day.

One percent who have endured hardships, one percent who have endured family separations, one percent who've undertaken an incredibly high pace of operations during this decade we have been at war. Thousands have paid the ultimate price of their lives. Tens of thousands more have come home missing limbs with scars, both visible and invisible, that they will carry until their final day.

We should remember them and we should thank them, too, for this day.

I am incredibly fortunate to get to meet so many Sailors and Marines around the world doing extraordinary work on behalf of us all, and I'm going to take one minute to tell you what your Navy and Marine Corps does on a day-to-day basis.

I'll pick one day – March 19th of last year. On that one day, United States Navy submarines and surface ships launched cruise missiles over Libya to establish a no-fly zone. On that same day air support off a big deck amphibious ship flew the skies over Libya.

On that same day, we had 20,000 Marines in combat in Afghanistan. On that same day, 20,000 Sailors were at sea and on the ground supporting that fight.

On that same day, we had ships fighting pirates off the Horn of Africa.

On that same day, we had ships in the Caribbean interdicting drugs.

On that same day, we had a carrier strike group delivering aid to the Japanese after the tsunami. On that same day, we had an amphibious ready group come from southern Japan to

northern Japan and the Marines on that strike group also delivered aid. And those Marines and those Sailors used the same targeting techniques to make sure the aid got to the right place that they were using in Afghanistan.

On that same day, we had a ship circumnavigating Africa in the Africa Partnership Station to build partners. That same day we had another ship circumnavigating South America doing the same thing.

On that same day, we had ships in the South Pacific doing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

That's one day in the Navy and Marine Corps. That's what the Navy and Marine Corps do for our country every single day.

And Mississippians have been a part of everything our military does, and graduates of this great university have served with distinction in every branch of the service, including your speaker last night at graduation.

Mississippians serve in our military at a rate higher than almost any other place in this country. Some of the graduates sitting here today have already been a part of that proud heritage, and some are about to join. Seventeen people are being commissioned from ROTC this weekend in the Army and the Air Force, and there are almost 2,000 veterans, service members and dependents that call MSU home, and I want to thank the state, and particularly those who have or who will serve this country. Thank you.

Service, though, just isn't about the military. There are so many ways you can help make things better. After World War II, Mississippi and Mississippi State welcomed back our share of the 16 million people who served during that war. They returned, they went to college on the GI bill, they expanded their horizons. They got a chance at a better life.

My father was one of those who, after getting a degree at Ole Miss in 1922, came back and got another degree at Mississippi State in 1952. A lot of your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were a part of that generation. This so-called greatest generation literally saved our country.

Born in the '20s, grew up during the Depression, went out and won World War II, tested in places like Iwo Jima and Anzio, Casablanca and Guadalcanal, Normandy and Midway. During their lives, they saw more and experienced more than most of us can even imagine, and then they came back and they changed America.

I want to tell you a quick story about one of them, a fellow Mississippian, Jack Lucas from Hattiesburg. He lied about his age and joined the Marines at 14.

He made it all the way through boot camp, all the way to Hawaii with his unit. Then they found out how old he was and they separated him from his unit and said, "You're going home."

But he didn't want to go home, so he stowed away on the first ship that he could. Didn't know where it was going. Turned out it was going to a place called Iwo Jima.

By the time they found Jack Lucas, it was way too late to do anything about it, so he went ashore with one of the first waves. Two grenades came into his position and he grabbed both of them and fell on them.

Now, Iwo Jima is made up of volcanic black sand, very soft, very fine, and he shoved both the grenades as far into the sand as he could, and they both went off. The people in his unit thought he was dead, but he wasn't. A corpsman came by and patched him up.

He got sent home and he went to the White House, where he was awarded the Medal of Honor. And then he went back home and started the ninth grade.

There are literally thousands of stories like Jack Lucas,' and you here today are the carriers of that legacy. You're the descendants of the greatest generation, and your generation has exactly the same potential to change America and to change the world that generation did.

You can be the next greatest generation. But whether what you do is held up 50, 60, 70 years from now as an example to graduates then is up to you, what you do over those next 40, 50, 60 years. Because one thing is very certain as you get into an uncertain world – there are no end to things that need doing.

You don't have to join the military to serve, although we do need skilled, dedicated people. There are other acts of quiet heroism that go on every day. It's a teacher staying after school to help a student who's struggling. It's a nurse who stays on after her shift is over to be with a certain patient.

There's the neighbor who mows the yard of the elderly person living next door. There's the farmer in the Mississippi Delta who put people through college – including here – anonymously; didn't even tell anyone, not even his own family.

What I'm asking you graduates to do is do something bigger than yourselves, do something outside yourselves. Do something to give back to this unique country of ours. Do something to help people that you may never know and they won't know that you did it. Do something that's not just about you or your personal advancement.

Now, there is absolutely nothing, nothing wrong with making money, and there's nothing wrong with being a success in your chosen profession, and there's nothing wrong and a whole lot right about taking care of your family and of yourself.

But at the end of your life, the most important things are not going to be the money or the stuff that you've accumulated. I have never seen a hearse with a U-Haul.

The important things are going to be the people you meet, the lives you've improved, the futures you've made brighter. Do something that will last. It doesn't have to be in 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. Get involved in your school, in your church, in your community. Get involved in your state and your country. Be passionate about it. We need your heads, we need your hands; we need your hearts. And I'm hoping you'll do something that you don't see the results of the next day or maybe ever.

I told you that my father was an older member of the greatest generation. His birthday was last week, and if he had lived he would have been 111 years old. He lived his whole life in Ackerman and he's buried less than three miles from where he was born.

He owned a hardware store in Ackerman, and he grew trees for a living. He died in 1986 when he was 85. The last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. Now, he knew at 85 years old that it was an absolute certainty that he would never get anything out of those trees. He knew for a fact he would never see them grow and mature. He knew for a fact nothing would ever happen in his life of what he was doing, but he did it.

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, and he did it for their children and their children who I will never meet. He did it out of hope. He did it out of faith.

So cherish this day, this graduation, and when it's over, when you've turned in your cap and gown, go out and do something that will be cherished after you're gone. Commit an act of faith. Commit an act of hope. Decide what trees you're going to plant.

Congratulations.