

The Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Louisiana State University Commencement
15 May 2014

To Chancellor King Alexander, to Buddy Guy, to distinguished guests, thank you. The fact that an Ole Miss Graduate is doing the commencement at LSU, you now what this means don't you? There is a chance for peace in the Middle East.

I have to say one thing, and it'll just be one thing, about football. I got a great tour of tiger stadium today. But I want to talk about a game that happened long before most of you graduates were even born, probably before some of your parents were born. It was November 1972. Ole Miss was ahead by 16 to 10. Four seconds left to go. LSU was on the Ole Miss 10. Burt Jones was quarterback. He dropped back to pass, he rolled left and couldn't find anybody; he rolled right and couldn't find anybody. Finally he threw incomplete.

Still, three seconds left on the clock. Next play LSU scored and won 17 to 16. I have turned my watch back four seconds when I entered Louisiana. *[Laughter]* So I want you to pay very close attention because you will never hear me say this again: Geaux Tigers. *[Applause]*

And I want you to know that I spelled that right: geaux.

Thank you so much for having me here. Thank you particularly to Class of 2014.

Since the very first students arrived at the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning & Military Academy in 1860, this University has been an incredibly important part of Southern and American history. It has gone from those early days to one of this nation's finest universities, with some of the best faculty and facilities in the country. That's a testament to the skill and the talent of everybody sitting here today, faculty, staff, students, friends, supporters.

As Chancellor Alexander said, my family has some pretty deep ties to LSU. We manage to be civil to each other every day, save one, in the year. Three of my four first cousins from Hammond, Louisiana, are graduates of LSU. Nearly all my wife's family, as he said, is from Church Point and Opelousas, went to LSU. They are the Holliers, and I can spell that too. And I do know not to call any of my in-laws when either the Tigers or the Saints are playing.

To the Class of 2014: Great congratulations. You have earned the right to be here, you've made the effort, and you've put in the time. But remember, as you've been reminded by other people, you wouldn't be here without a whole lot of help.

Behind every single one of you are mothers and dads, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends, coaches, teachers. Hundreds and hundreds of other people, a lot of them you may not even know, who made your accomplishment today possible. After the ceremony – and I know you're going to do this anyway, but after the ceremony take the time to give them an extra hug. Thank them one more time for what they've done, because in a real way, today is their day too.

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 watch every day to keep us safe.

LSU was founded as a military school, and your graduates have a long and distinguished history in uniform. In World War II, this campus was home to one of the Navy's V-12 programs which was like a shortened, condensed ROTC experience to prepare volunteers to become Navy pilots to fight in that war. Like a lot of schools, Ole Miss included, until the 1960's military courses were mandatory for the male students that went here.

General Claire Chennault, went to school at LSU before heading to World War I where he became one of the Army's pioneer aviators. During World War II, in China, he led the fighter pilots of the 1st American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers. Closer to my own office, and I have his sword in my office, General John Lejeune also went to school here before he moved on to the U.S. Naval Academy. Known as "the greatest of all Leathernecks," he was a hero of World War I and commanded the Army's 2nd Infantry Division during that war, which is astounding given the fact that he was a Marine. He went on to become the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps and was central in preparing our Navy and Marine Corps for World War II. His letter to the Marines in 1923 is read to every year, to every Marine, on the Marine's birthday.

These warriors from LSU were truly extraordinary. But truly extraordinary too, are those who serve this country today – every single person who wears the cloth of America. Every single person, just as professional, just as dedicated, just as skilled as those heroes of our past, and we

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

Tonight they are the 6000 Marines still in Afghanistan and almost 40,000 deployed around the world, everywhere from central Africa, to the islands of the Pacific, to the shores of the Black Sea. Tonight there are the thousands of Sailors on the 100 ships of our fleet which are away from home, forward deployed from the coasts of Europe, to the Middle East, to the South China Sea and to Northeast Asia. And besides the Navy and Marines Corps they are the Soldiers and Airmen in places like Korea and Germany. They are the Coast Guardsmen in the frigid waters of the Arctic.

They went to Indonesia after the Christmas Tsunami, to Louisiana and Mississippi after Katrina, to Japan after the Tsunami, to Haiti after the earthquake, to New York and New Jersey after Sandy, and this past winter to the Philippines after Haiyan. They are your friends, they are your brothers, and sisters – whether you know them or not. They are making a difference; they are doing something for others, something beyond themselves.

They have endured hardships and family separations, they've undertaken an incredibly high pace of operations during the nearly 13 years we have been at war. Thousands have paid the ultimate

price of their life. Tens of thousands more have come home missing limbs and have scars, both visible and invisible, which they will carry until their final day.

Those who have served before are here today in many roles as proud parents and grandparents, family members and friends. Some of them are sitting with you as graduates and fellow students who came back on the GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon program. I was honored today to commission ROTC students into the four branches of service who form the next link in that unbroken chain. So as we approach Memorial Day, I'd like the Veterans who have served or are serving today, to please stand and let us thank you for what you do.

Now, the question I want to ask the rest of you is will you join them? Will you serve? Now I'm not asking, and I'm not saying, and I certainly hope that you don't have to, risk your life.

Although we need skilled and dedicated people protecting our country, the military is far from the only way to serve. There are a whole lot of other quiet acts of heroism that go on around us every day.

It's the act of a teacher, staying after school to help a student who is struggling. It's the act of a nurse, staying on after a shift is done to be with a patient to comfort that person. It's the act of a neighbor, mowing the grass because the neighbor has become too old to do it. Or maybe it's the act of a father putting people through college without ever telling his family. That last example happened to a close friend of mine who found out that her father had put scores of people through college. She found out at his funeral when people came up to thank her.

It's the service that matters. Service to this country, service to our fellow Americans, and service to those in need all over the world. I hope that I've learned this in my own life. I graduated from the Ole Miss in 1969, when the Cold War and Vietnam were at their height. I think I learned as a 21 year old Naval Officer what it is like to be a member of a team when lives are at stake. I learned that what I did had ramifications the next watch, the next day, and maybe the next year.

So, to the graduates, do something outside yourself. Do something to make a difference, do something to give back to this unique nation that we call home. Do something to help people who may never know you and may never realize what you did. Do something that is not just about you or your advancement.

Now there is absolutely nothing wrong with making money. There is nothing wrong with seeing how far you can go in your chosen profession. There is nothing wrong and a lot right with looking after yourself and looking after your family.

But, at the end of your life the most important things probably are not going to be the money or the stuff that you've accumulated. The important things will be the people you've touched, the lives you've made better, and the futures you've made brighter.

I am privileged to lead both the Navy and Marine Corps, the greatest expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known, and one of the best things I get to do is talk to Veterans of those services. Earlier this year I was in the Marshall Islands, a group of tiny atolls in the middle of the Pacific. Seventy years ago a task force of Marines and Sailors landed there during the march

across the Pacific. I stood under the rusting Japanese guns that are still mounted along that beach, I was reminded of how costly that one battle was.

While I was there I had the honor to have dinner with a group of Veterans who had been there seventy years ago, and who had traveled back half way around the world to remember what they accomplished, to remember friends who hadn't come back. Every one of those people told me how important their service was, how important it was to them to do something bigger than themselves, how important it had been to make a difference. They remembered their service like it was yesterday, and after seventy years it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people that aren't Veterans, but remember the two years they spent teaching while they were young, or the time they spent helping to get something they cared about put into action, or the mission trip that they made and how they helped build a school or a hospital, and help build a better future for others.

One thing is very certain as you go into a very uncertain world: There is no end of things that need doing. I guess the question is: will you become America's next greatest generation? Like the one who endured the depression, won the war, and came back to build the greatest country on Earth? Will you be lauded for your accomplishments sixty or seventy years afterwards?

To do that, you have to do something that's going to last. It doesn't need to be the Marine Corps – but take a look at the Peace Corps. You might have had your fill of political speeches from Free Speech Alley, so you don't have to run for office. In fact, that might be the least of it. But

vote, and get passionately interested in the events of your time. Whether they are political or not, don't let them pass you by. Get involved in your school, your community, your state, your country, your world. That Greatest Generation changed the world. They changed it for the better – you have exactly that same opportunity.

I hope that you will do something that you don't see the results of tomorrow, or the next day, or even ever. My father Raymond Mabus Sr. was a member of the Greatest Generation. He made a living as a tree farmer in Ackerman, Mississippi.

He died when he was eighty-five years old. In the last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. He knew for an absolute fact he would never get any benefit from those trees. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never see any kind of economic or other return from those trees. But he planted them. He planted those trees as a matter of faith. He planted those trees as a matter of hope. He did it for me. He did it for his granddaughters that he never met. He did it for their children and generations that followed that he would never know, and who will never know him.

So cherish this day, cherish your graduation, because you've earned it. But when this day is over, you need to go out and earn some more things that will be cherished long after you're gone. It's your turn, it's your life. So, tomorrow – ask yourself, what trees am I going to plant?

Thank you.