

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus  
Secretary of the Navy  
University of South Alabama Commencement Ceremony  
Mobile, Alabama  
Saturday, May 9, 2015

Thank you, President Waldrop. I am very happy to be with you today, so to the faculty and the staff, families, friends, most of all, to the class of 2015 University of South Alabama.

Since its first day of classes in June 1964, this university has been offering the highest quality education to this state and to our nation, with some of the best facilities, the best faculty anywhere. It remains that way today, which is a testament to the skill and the talent of everybody sitting here today – faculty, staff, students, friends, supporters.

To the class of 2015, congratulations. You've done the work. You made the effort. You put in the time. But I want you to remember that you couldn't be here today without a whole lot of other people. Behind every single one of you – your mothers and daddies, grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers, coaches. Hundreds and hundreds of other people, a lot of whom you may not even know, have made your accomplishment today possible. And I know you're going to do this anyway, but after the ceremony give them an extra hug. Thank them one more time for what they've done because, in a very real way, today is their day too.

As President Waldrop said, it's also important to remember those who in a 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 and watch every day, keeping us safe and secure. The grounds here at USA have been home to students who've represented your alma mater at the forefront of medicine and education here in Alabama and around this country and around the world. You've had quite a legacy of professional athletes as well representing the Jaguar name on the national stage, carrying the incredible spirit of this university around the country and the world.

And just a side note, y'all scared Navy to death last year. (Laughter.) It was the first time I've ever seen two penalties on an extra point on a two-point extra point drive – both of them in the Navy's favor. We're not playing you again. (Laughter.)

So to all the alumni of South Alabama's past, and to you sitting here today, you deserve our recognition and our praise, but so too all those who serve this country today, those who wear the cloth of this country. And I want to talk about them for a moment. Every single person in uniform today, just as professional, just as dedicated, just as skilled as the heroes of our past.

And we ought to be just as proud of every single one of them. We ought to be grateful to all those who made the choice to defend this great country because fewer than

1 percent – 1 percent of America wears the uniform today – 1 percent to protect the other 99 percent of us, 1 percent who have volunteered, who have given themselves freely for years and years, and who they and their families have sacrificed day after day.

They are the 40,000 Marines deployed around the world in 38 different countries today, from Central Africa to the islands of the Pacific, to the shores of the Black Sea. They're the thousands of sailors on our hundred ships that are forward-deployed today from the coast of Europe to the Middle East, to the Western Pacific, to Northeast Asia. And they're our sister services – the airmen, and the soldiers in the DMZ in Korea, the Coast Guardsmen in the frigid waters of the Arctic.

They went to Indonesia after the Christmas Tsunami. They came to Mississippi and Louisiana after Katrina, to Japan after the Tsunami, to Haiti after the earthquake, to New York after Sandy, to the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan. And they are right now in Nepal after the devastating earthquake. They're your friends, they're your brothers, they're your sisters – even if you don't know them.

They are making a difference. They are doing something for others, something beyond themselves. They're endured hardships and family separations and they've undertaken an incredibly high pace of operations during the 13 years we've been in conflict. Thousands have paid the ultimate price with their lives. Tens of thousands more have come home with missing limbs and with scars, both visible and invisible, that they will carry to their final day.

So those of you here today, as grandparents, as parents, as family members, as friends, as graduates, who came back here on the GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program, I'd like to do what President Waldrop has done as we approach Memorial Day, is recognize our veterans. Regardless of when or where you served, please stand and let us thank you for that service.

Now, the question – the question I want to ask the rest of you is, will you join? Will you serve? Now, I'm not saying, and I certainly hope that you don't have to risk your life. We need skilled and dedicated people protecting our country. But the military is far from the only way to serve. There are other proud acts of heroism that go on about us every single day. It's the act of the teacher staying after class to help a struggling student. It's the nurse who stays on after the shift is over to comfort and care for a patient. It's the act of the neighbor mowing the yard for the elderly person whose home is next door without being asked.

It's the father putting people through college without ever telling his family. That last example happened to a friend of mine who found out that her father had put all sorts of people through school, and they only found out at his funeral. It's the service that matters – the service to our fellow countrymen, the service to those in need all around the world. I hope I learned a little bit of that in my own life.

I graduated from Ole Miss in 1969, when the Cold War and Vietnam were at their height. I learned as a 21-year old naval officer what it means to be part of a team with lives at stake. I learned what I did had ramifications for the next watch, the next day, and maybe the next year. So do something outside yourself. Do something to make a difference. Do something to give back to this unique nation of ours. Do something to help people who may never know you and never know what you did to help them. Do something that's not about you or your advancement.

Now, there's nothing wrong with making money. There's nothing wrong with seeing how far you can go in your chosen field or profession. There's nothing wrong, and a lot right, about taking care of yourself and of your family. But at the end of life, most important things aren't going to be the money or the stuff that you accumulate. I have never seen a hearse with U-Haul. (Laughter.) The important things will be the people you've touched, the lives you've made better, the future you made right.

I'm privileged to lead the Navy and Marine Corps, the greatest expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known. One of the best things I get to do is to talk to veterans. In March I went to Iwo Jima for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of that battle. And standing there, on the volcanic sands of the beach, I was awed at what our Marines accomplished there, and reminded of just how bloody and how costly that battle was. A Marine was lost every two yards across the entire island of Iwo Jima. Half the Medals of Honor that have been awarded in the Marine Corps were awarded during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

We had 50 veterans there that day, all in their late 80s and early 90s. They had traveled across the Pacific to remember what they had done there, remember the friends they had lost there. That ceremony, in the shadow of Mount Suribachi, where that iconic photo of Marines raising the American flag, and ever one of these Marines told me how important their service was, how important it was for them to do something bigger than themselves, how important it had been to make a difference. They remembered that service like it was yesterday. And after 70 years, it had not dimmed in its brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people who aren't veterans. But they remember the two years they spent teaching when they were young. Or they remember the time they spent helping to get something they cared about put into action. Or the mission trip that they took and how they helped build a school, build a hospital, build better lives – because only one thing is certain as you go into this uncertain world. There is no end of things that need doing.

And I guess the question is, are you going to become America's next greatest generation – the generation that grew up in the depression, fought in World War II, came back and established the greatest economy the world has ever known? Will you be lauded for your accomplishments 60 or 70 years from now? I hope you'll do something that will last. It doesn't have to be in the Marine Corps, but look at the Peace Corps.

You don't have to run for office, but vote. Get passionately involved in the issues of your time. Whether they're political or not, don't let them pass you by.

Get involved in your school, your community, your county, your city, your state, our nation, the world. The greatest generation changed the world. They've made it better. You can too. I hope you'll do something for yourselves that you don't see the results of tomorrow or next year or maybe ever.

My father was a member of that greatest generation. He learned his living growing trees in Ackerman, Mississippi. He died in 1986 when he was 85 years old. In the last year of his life, he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. He did it as a matter of faith and he did it as a matter of hope. He did it for me and he did it for his granddaughters who he never met, and he did it for their children and their children and their children down through the generations in his family that he would never know.

So cherish your day. Cherish your graduation. You've earned it. But when today is over, when the celebrating is done, go out and earn some things – earn some things that will be cherished long after you (leave ?). Tomorrow, ask yourselves: What trees am I going to plant? It's your turn. It's your life. Congratulations.