

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
USNS Robert F. Kennedy (T-AO 208) Naming Ceremony
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
Boston, Massachusetts
Tuesday, September 20, 2016

Good morning. And thank you all so much for being here. I'm so happy to be back at the Kennedy Library. And it was my pleasure to stand here five years ago and name our next carrier the John F. Kennedy. And it is a great honor and privilege to be back for this year's naming. And as Joe said, those of you not related to the Kennedy family, welcome. Well done. (Laughter.)

Well, what our Navy and Marine Corps uniquely provide to America is presence – around the world, around the clock – ensuring stability, deterring adversaries, reassuring allies, and giving our leaders options in times of crisis. The Navy and Marine Corps are America's away team. We never get a home game. We don't want a home game. Because Sailors and Marines, equally in times of peace and of war, are in the right place not just at the right time, but all the time. There is no next best thing to being there.

And in every case, from high-end combat, irregular warfare, to disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, our naval assets get on station faster, we stay longer, we bring everything we need with us. And because we're operating from sovereign U.S. territory, we don't have to ask any other country's permission to do the job our nation needs. But to get that presence, we got to have those big gray hulls on the horizon.

So we've reversed the decline in shipbuilding. In 2001, the U.S. Navy had 316 ships. Seven years later, in 2008, after one of the great military buildups in our nation's history, we were down to 278 ships. During that seven years, the Navy put 41 ships under contract – not enough to keep our fleet from continuing to shrink and not enough to keep our shipyards in business. I've been there, in this office, a little more than seven years now. So it's an exact comparison. In those seven years, we've put 85 ships under contract with an overall 20 percent smaller top line, and we've bought 35 percent more aircraft during the same time.

And the Navy's efforts, with a lot of help from Congress – people like Congressman Joe Kennedy – has guaranteed we're going to reach 300 ships by the end of this decade, by 2019. And we will get to our assessed need of 308 ships by 2021. It takes a long time to build ships. And it takes a long time to rebuild a fleet. And one of the great privileges, but also one of the great responsibilities that I have, is naming all these ships. And because the fleet is growing, and growing pretty dramatically, I've had the opportunity to name quite a few – all of which were special.

But today's naming is particularly important to me personally. Robert Kennedy often quoted George Bernard Shaw: There are those who look at things as they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and ask, why not? When I became Secretary in 2009, there were a lot of things that I encountered that begged the question, why not?

At that time, openly gay Americans were not allowed to serve in the military. Why not? In the Navy, women were not permitted on submarines and riverines or to be a SEAL. Why not? In the Marine Corps, women were not allowed to be in certain ground combat occupations. Why not? On the campuses of Harvard and Yale, Princeton and Columbia, Naval ROTC had been gone for 40 years and was not present. Why not? And when I was told that it was not naval tradition to name Navy ships after civil rights leaders, why not?

And in every case, as with so many kinds of cases and those questions, there was no good answer. So I strongly supported the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," led the implementation of open service in the Navy and Marine Corps. I opened the service on the submarines and the riverine corps to women, and advocated for opening all combat specialties to women across the Navy and the Marine Corps, which happened last January and February.

Working with the presidents of those great universities, we brought Naval ROTC back to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia. And at the same time, established ROTC units at Rutgers and Arizona State, our country's two most diverse campuses. And again, Senator Kennedy's words – Robert Kennedy's words: Ultimately, America's answer to intolerance is diversity. A diverse force is a stronger force. Our Navy and Marine Corps draw strength from diversity of background, diversity of thought, diversity of perspective. It's a dangerous thing for a military force to become too predictable. A predictable force is a defeatable force. Diversity of thinking, diversity of experience, diversity of background makes us stronger.

And in January of this year we announced a new class of ships. We're going to buy six of these ships, and name the first the John Lewis, after the civil rights icon for dedicating his life, and risking his life, in the pursuit of justice, equality, and freedom. And the Secretary of the Navy also gets to establish the naming convention for how we're going to name these ships. So these six ships are going to be named after leaders in civil rights and human rights. So the second ship I named last month the USNS Harvey Milk an advocate from the LGBTQ community who was assassinated 10 months into his term as the first openly gay elected official in California.

The third I'm officially naming in a few weeks, but whose name has already been announced, will be the USNS Earl Warren after the Supreme Court justice who unanimously voted in Brown versus Board, with that signal case, and with so many others that advanced the cause of civil rights. And yesterday at the Boston Public Library I named the USNS Lucy Stone and the USNS Sojourner Truth in honor in honor of two women abolitionists and suffragists who paved the way for the 15th and the 19th amendment.

And all of this brings me to the reason we're here today. The class would be incomplete without the name Robert Kennedy – Navy veteran, attorney general, senator, and a leader who committed and ultimately sacrificed his life while pursuing justice and equality, freedom. As his

brother Edward, he was a simply good and decent man who saw wrong and tried to right it. He was a leader who struggled for social justice, supporting integration and voting rights. He sought to eliminate poverty by providing education and health care and employment opportunities to our nation's most marginalized citizens. And he was a voice for human rights not just at home, but around the world.

He could have cancelled a campaign speech in the primarily African-American section of Indianapolis on the night Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. But instead, he spoke to those who sought to move our country in the direction of polarization, enlisting them rather to understand and comprehend, to show compassion and love. In other words, he lived his life in a manner that epitomizes both our Navy motto, *Semper Fortis*, Always Courageous, and our Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis*, Always Faithful.

Now, I'm going to take a personal moment here. And I apologize for making this very personal to me. I was a high school freshman in a town of a thousand people 90 miles south of Oxford in 1962, when James Meredith integrated Ole Miss. That would not have been possible without the conviction and moral authority of John and Robert Kennedy. And on Saturday, I was at the Ole Miss-Alabama game – segue – (laughter) – and James Meredith was there with a place of honor in the chancellor's box, as he is at every Ole Miss home game.

And I watched the next year as a previous Mississippi governor from my hometown of 1,000 people was defeated in his bid for another term, in large part because he had invited Senator John Kennedy to spend the night in the Mississippi Governor's Mansion. And his opponent put up billboards all across the state with a picture of a bed. And it said: If you elect me governor, no Kennedy will ever spend the night in the Governor's Mansion in Mississippi again.

I was a senior in high school, three months from going to Ole Miss to study, when Robert Kennedy came and spoke at Ole Miss. The university tried to put him in a very small space but the demand for tickets was so big, the pressure was so great, they finally had to move it to the coliseum. Six thousand people attended that day. And he got an enormous reception. And if you look at the website today, the Ole Miss library says that the speech generated a lot of enthusiasm and much good will. In 1967, when I was a freshman at Ole Miss, Senator Kennedy and a young civil rights – Mississippi civil rights, attorney named Marian Wright came to the Mississippi Delta, saw first-hand the poverty of it and left a changed person, determined to do something. And he did. In Marian Wright's own words, he didn't go away.

Robert Kennedy's pushing, compassion and visibility set in motion a chain of events that culminated years later in the virtual elimination of hunger in America. I have a pen and ink drawing of Senator Kennedy here on that trip, done by a great friend of mine, Mississippi artist Bill Dunlap, who cut class that day to go listen to him, that hangs in my office at home. A few other things about Marian Wright. On that trip, she met Robert Kennedy's aide, Peter Edelman. She is now Marian Wright Edelman, and has been for almost 40 years. First black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar. For many years now, head the Children's Defense Fund. And, by the way, the sponsor of the ship, Sojourner Truth.

In 1970, I was at Johns Hopkins getting my master's degree in American government. And I did my thesis on Robert Kennedy's presidential race. And whether he would have won that convention – and I interviewed a lot of delegates, a lot of people around him on the what-ifs – I concluded he would have won, that Chicago would have been different, and this country would have been different.

And in 1968 – and this is the most meaningful thing to me – I happened to be in San Francisco, California with my dad. My dad owned a hardware store in Ackerman, Mississippi, but he had this sensational curiosity about the world. And we were on our way to go across the Trans-Siberian Railroad that summer. I noticed that day there were fliers everywhere that there was going to be a rally in Union Square for Robert Kennedy running for president. So I asked my dad if I could go. And he said I could. He was going to take a nap, which he did every day of his life. So I went. And I got to meet and shake hands with Robert Kennedy. And this photo, here's Senator Kennedy. He's on a car; that's how many people are there. And there I am.

I had kept the photo in my office as governor, as ambassador, and now as Secretary. The inspiration for me and for so many others around this country, to see politics and public service as a noble profession, an opportunity to make the future brighter for everyone, came in large part from him. It's a legacy worth preserving by means of the Navy's highest honor: having a ship bear his name, and assigning that ship sponsors who personify his values. A ship sponsor is one of the Navy's most important and enduring traditions. The sponsors remain in contact with that ship for as long as it's in the fleet. The first call a new captain makes is to the sponsor.

And so today I'm very happy to announce that Ethel Kennedy is the honorary sponsor of the USNS Robert Kennedy. And Kathleen Kennedy Townsend as a sponsor of our newest USNS ship. That ship's going to be there for decades. The story of its namesake will be told for generations to come. And the story of his pursuit of justice and equality and freedom will be told to generations to come, not just in America but around the world. It was my honor to name T-AO 208 USNS Robert Kennedy.