

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
University of Arkansas Commencement
Saturday, 15 December 2012

Mr. Chancellor, thank you so much for that wonderful introduction. To the two honorary degree recipients, Dr. Harding and Dr. Smith, I am honored to share this stage with you. To my longtime friend and law professor here, Steve Sheppard, who was as volunteer on my very first campaign and worked with Governor David Pryor who is one of the greatest governors and senators that our country has ever produced.

I am very happy to be here and Dr. Smith, your story reminded me of one that I know I don't have in my speech but I got out of the United States Navy and went back home to Ackerman, Mississippi and was walking down Main Street of Ackerman which is also the only street with a traffic light on it. And I ran into the librarian and she looked at me and asked "what are you going to do now that you are out of the military?" And I said that "I'm going to law school." She said, "Are you going to Ole Miss, son?" And I said, "No, I'm going to Harvard." She said, "Couldn't you get into Ole Miss?"

I'm very glad to be here particularly with the Class of 2012. You have given me such great hospitality, such a warm welcome, I would never think of mentioning the football game that occurred a couple of months ago. And I can't even remember the final score, 30-27 Ole Miss.

And I am an Ole Miss graduate and I live and die Ole Miss football, so watch this very carefully and I'm sure I'm going to mess it up, but you won't see me doing this very often [Demonstrates.]—"Woooo. Pig. Sooie." There was an instructional video on Youtube.

This university, the University of Arkansas, as it has been since the very first students arrived here 140 years ago, is one of the finest schools in the United States and a premier research institution. That's testament not only to the talent and skill of your faculty and staff, but also the efforts of everybody sitting here today.

Congratulations. Today you will receive your diploma and next summer, your names will be added to the Senior Walk because you've done the work, you've put in the time, you've made a difference.

But as I mentioned before, you wouldn't be here without a whole lot of other people.

Behind every one of you are the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, friends, coaches, teachers. Hundreds and hundreds of other people, some of them you probably don't even know, who made today possible.

Now after the ceremony – and I know you're going to do this anyway -- give those who have supported you along the way an extra hug. Thank them for the sacrifices they made – thank them for what they have done because in a very real way, today is their day too.

And parents, I know exactly how you feel because in May I sat and watched my oldest daughter graduate from college with that mixture of pride and sadness of passage of time. And the only thing that confused me was in my mind's eye, I kept looking at her as a three year old begging for one more ride on my shoulders. And I wondered why the university would be granting a degree to a three year old.

It's also important to remember those who in a larger sense are to be thanked for a day like today. Those who have worn or are currently wearing the uniform of our country, who stand the watch every day to ensure our safety and our freedom.

Most of you who are graduating today were in middle school or younger when 9/11 happened. This is the world you've grown up in. Earlier this spring, we marked the one-year anniversary of the joint operation led by Navy SEALs which brought the world's most notorious terrorist to justice. And while the actions of those warriors that conducted that raid were truly extraordinary, equally as extraordinary actions occur every day by those who serve and wear the cloth of our nation.

Every Sailor, every Marine, every Soldier, every Airmen, every Coastguardsman is just as professional, just as dedicated, just as skilled as those who carried out that high-profile mission, and we ought to be just as proud of every one of them.

And in talking about our military, let me tell you a statistic and it is one that ought to scare you.

Today, in America, people 17 to 24 years old, 75 percent do not qualify to serve in our military. Three out of four Americans cannot serve because of health problems, educational issues or a criminal record. There is no room anymore in the military, in our economy and in our society for strong backs and weak minds.

And there is one more number to keep in mind. Fewer than one percent – one percent – wears the uniform of this country. One percent to protect the other 99 percent; one percent has volunteered and given freely of themselves for year after year of sacrifice over and over, enduring hardships, family separations, and an incredibly high-paced operations and thousands have paid the ultimate price. Tens of thousands more have come home with scars, both visible and invisible, that they will carry with them until their final day.

We are able to do what we do because of what they have done and are doing. We are able to pursue our lives because they have been willing to risk and sometimes lose their lives. As was said eloquently in World War II – they give their today for our tomorrow.

I am incredibly fortunate to lead the Navy and Marine Corps and to get to meet so many Sailors and Marines around the world doing incredible work on behalf of us all, and I want to take a minute to tell you about one day in the Navy and Marine Corps.

The day I pick is March 19th of last year. On that day, submarines and surface ships of the Navy launched cruise missiles over Libya to establish a no-fly zone and a big deck amphibious ship provided air support and rescued an Air Force pilot who crashed that day.

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 interdicting drugs in the Caribbean.

On that same day, we had a carrier strike group delivering aid to Japan after the terrible tsunami. On that same day, we had an amphibious ready group of three ships come north from Okinawa to do the same thing. On that same day, we had a ship circumnavigating Africa in the Africa Partnership Station doing humanitarian assistance, building schools, providing medical, dental and veterinarian care. On 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. On that same day we had Sailors and Marines at countless places doing countless things all for the same purpose – protecting others.

That's one day and that's not even half of what the Navy and Marine Corps were doing that day in countries and places around the world. That is an example of what they do every single day on our behalf.

And graduates of this great university have served with distinction in the Navy and Marine Corps and every branch of the service.

Some people sitting here today have already been a part of that proud heritage, and some are about to join. Eleven people are being commissioned from ROTC into the Army and the Air Force, and there were 575 veterans, service members and dependents that received military educational benefits here this semester, and the Navy has recruited 21 young naval officers in the last three years to join our fleet from this great school. So, I want to thank the University of Arkansas for your commitment to the Navy, to the military, to our country.

It has been that way for a long time. As Arkansas welcomed back its share of the 16 million veterans that served during World War II. Some came back, went to school on the GI Bill, expanded their horizons, and expanded their lives.

A lot of your grandparents and great-grandparents were a part of that so-called greatest generation.

They grew up during the Depression, won World War II, were tested in places like Iwo Jima and Anzio, Casablanca and Guadalcanal, Midway and Normandy. And during their early lives, they saw and experienced more than most of us can even imagine, and then they came back, they changed America.

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

He made it through boot camp, and got to Hawaii and when they found out how old he was they told him he was going home. He didn't want to go home.

So, he stowed away on a ship to keep from being sent home, so he got on the first ship that was leaving. Didn't know where it was going. By the time that they found him, it was too late to send him back and that ship was going to Iwo Jima.

He went ashore with one of the first waves. He and his squad were fighting in Iwo Jima when two grenades came in their position and Jack Lucas grabbed them both and fell on them.

Now, the sand of Iwo Jima is made up of black volcanic sand, very soft, very fine, and he shoved both the grenades as far into the sand as he could, and both those grenades went off and he was hurt pretty badly. His unit thought he was dead. But a corpsman came by and found out he was still alive and patched him up.

They finally sent him home. He went to the White House ,received the Medal of Honor and came back home and started the ninth grade.

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

But whether what you do will be held up 50, 60, 70 years from now as an example to graduates is up to you, what you do over these next decades. Because one thing is very certain as you go into an uncertain world – there are no end of things that need doing.

You sure don't have to join the military to serve, although we do need skilled, dedicated people. There are so many ways to make things better. There are acts of quiet heroism that go on every day. It's the teacher staying after school to help a struggling student. It's the nurse staying after the shift is over to be with a patient. It's the neighbor who mows the yard of the elderly neighbor next door.

It's the farmer who puts people through college anonymously and doesn't even tell anyone, not even his own family.

To the graduates here today: do something bigger than yourselves, do something outside yourselves. Do something to give back to this unique country that is ours. Do something to help people that you will probably 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 being a success in your chosen profession, there's absolutely nothing wrong with making money, and there's nothing wrong and a whole lot right about taking care of your family and of yourself.

But at the end of 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've loved, the lives you've improved, the futures you've made brighter. 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 you ought to 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, your nation, get involved in the world and be passionate about it. We need your heads, we need your hands and most of all we need your hearts. Do something that will last. Do something that you won't see the results of next year or maybe ever.

Wordsworth wrote: "that the best portion of a good man's life – his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love."

My father was an older member of that greatest generation. He died in 1986 and he's buried less than three miles from where he was born in the little town of Ackerman, Mississippi. He owned a hardware store there and he also grew trees for a living. The last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted thousands. Now, he knew for an absolute fact that he would never see any benefit from those trees. He knew for an absolute fact he would never see them grow and mature. He knew for an absolute fact that nothing he was doing would he ever see come to fruition, but he did it.

He did it as an act of hope. He did it as an act of faith. He did for me, 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 I want you to cherish this day, this graduation, and when it's over, when you've turned in your caps and gowns, do something that will be cherished while you are here and when you're gone. Commit an act of faith. Commit an act of hope. Decide what trees you're going to plant.

Congratulations.