

Bryant College Graduate School Commencement Address

From the Comptroller General

Bryant College Graduate School Commencement Address "Dare To Make a Difference"

THE HONORABLE DAVID M. WALKER
COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

MAY 17, 2002

- Thank you President Machtley for that kind introduction. I would like to thank you, General Almonte, the trustees, and the faculty for the honor to make today's commencement address. I'd also like to thank the Honorary Degree Committee for their decision to award me an honorary doctorate degree.
- My congratulations to the graduates and to your families, whose financial and moral support can go a long way in helping you to achieve your goals. As a parent of two college graduates, I know from first-hand experience that this support is both important and ongoing.
- None of us should ever underestimate the importance of family. For me, family is one of the three cornerstones in life, God and country being the other two.
- My talk this afternoon will touch briefly on three topics: (1) the importance of public service (2) developing a solid reputation, and (3) making a difference.
- We all should live and work by certain principles, standards, core values...or whatever we choose to call them. They can serve as a foundation and touchstone for how we live our lives and make our decisions. Bryant has its own list of core values: high standards of civility, the sacredness of the person, service to others, and affirmation to both tradition and change.
- My agency, GAO, has its own set of core values as well: accountability, integrity, and reliability. We use them to guide decision-making both externally in connection with providing services to our client, the U.S. Congress, and internally in our efforts to be a model employer. When you come to Washington, and I invite you to do so, you'll see our core values over the entrance of our building. They're also on our letterhead, business cards, and the famous GAO "blue-cover" reports. More importantly, they are in our heads and in our hearts.
- These core values represent our institutional beliefs and boundaries. They describe the nature of our work and, most importantly, the character of our people. It is character that defines the type of graduates we must hire in the future. It is character that defines today's public servant. And it is character that will largely define each of you, no matter what you decide to do in life.
- Having a set of core values can help you to make a difference in many dimensions of life. As a result, you should determine what your core values are and use them to dare to make a difference!
- Dare to make a difference! You might ask, "How can one person make a difference and contribute to a better country and society?" Cynics are fond of saying one person can't make a difference, but they're wrong. Ordinary people do extraordinary things every day.

The Importance of Public Service

- In his 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." This challenge is even more important today than it was more than 40 years ago.
- Clearly, this is an important day for all of you, and one that hopefully you'll always remember.
- As we all know, the events of a single day can change the course of history: Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the explosion of the shuttle Challenger, and the events of the day that all of us now simply refer to as "9-11."
- We're now in a world vastly different from what it was before 9-11, and we are only beginning to fully grasp the challenges that lie ahead. Most of us now realize that we're going to have to do some things differently. We're going to have to be more vigilant and, as many of us have discovered at the airports, more patient. But we must move forward. We cannot and must not live in fear.
- At the same time, our heightened sense of vulnerability has prompted us to take stock of our lives and reassess our values and priorities. In recent years, American unity and love of country haven't always been obvious. Now, in the United States, patriotism is in vogue, and the American flag is everywhere. From a personal perspective, I've worn a flag on my lapel long before it was fashionable to do so.
- In observing the reactions of many Americans to the events of 9-11, I am reminded of psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which I learned in college. Before 9-11, many Americans were concerned with self-actualization and the concept of "me." After 9-11, many Americans are concerned with self-preservation and the concept of "we."
- One positive aspect of 9-11 is that the public seems to have developed a greater respect for government and public service.
- As MBA graduates of a highly ranked business school, you have knowledge and skills that are in demand.
- As you weigh your options, both now and in the future, I hope you'll keep an open mind to use public service as a means to make a difference-both for others and for yourself. I also hope that at some point each of you will decide to give at least two years of your life to public service. This can be done either inside or outside of government. If you do, it will probably be a decision you will never regret and never forget.
- Ultimately, the choice of public service is grounded in personal values, rather than market values. It attracts people who want to "make a difference" for others; who seek to maximize their self worth rather than their net worth. You're hearing this from someone who chose to return to public service for these very reasons.
- Opting for public service is an honorable choice. It offers an opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those you know as well as those who you'll never meet. It's a calling where individuals and teams are capable of changing the future.

Looking Forward (Foresight)

- Nearly 25 years ago, Alvin Toffler's Future Shock stunned Americans and others around the world with its glimpse of a future radically transformed by an accelerating pace of change. Alvin has written many other books since Future Shock, and those of us who know him personally are still awed by his innovative and forward-looking mind.
- Today, one of GAO's key missions is to use foresight as a means to alert policymakers to long-term challenges facing the nation. Private industry, the nonprofit sector, and state and local government will all play a role in addressing these long-term challenges, but it's the federal government that often must take the lead.

- September 11 brought home in a tragic and unforgettable way just how much our security issues have changed since the end of the Cold War. Clearly, we must do what it takes to win the war against international terrorism and protect our homeland, but these efforts will take time and cost lots of money.
- The United States confronts a range of other key challenges. And if we fail to adjust course, we will, in time, also feel their impact. I'd like to spend a few moments to mention some these challenges.
- For example, we must confront certain inescapable demographic realities. America is aging, and the demands on our health care and retirement systems will only increase as the baby boomers begin to retire. Unless they are reformed, the major entitlement programs-Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid-will eventually overwhelm the federal budget.
- Markets, information, and enterprises are becoming globalized. The trend toward globalization presents great opportunities-and great risks. For better or for worse, the economic fortunes of once distant nations are now linked. In addition, the worldwide spread of diseases like AIDS and our planet's environmental problems now demand international responses to what were once seen as national concerns.
- Rapidly evolving science and technology has changed our lives, from how we design and sell products to how we diagnose and treat illness. But these innovations can also threaten our national security, personal privacy, and even our basic humanity.
- In many respects, our quality of life has never been better. We are living longer, are better educated, and are more likely to own our own homes. But, as you probably know from your own families, we are increasingly concerned about navigating gridlocked city streets, balancing work and family obligations, and addressing a range of other important quality-of-life issues.
- Our very prosperity is placing greater demands on our physical infrastructure. Billions of dollars will be needed to modernize everything from airports to bridges to water systems. The demands for such new investment will increasingly compete with other national priorities. Clearly, difficult choices lie ahead.
- Why do these trends matter? Because to ignore them is to accept a government that, in the future, is far less effective, far less responsive, far less flexible, and far less accountable to the people.
- Ignorance and apathy are not options for dealing with these challenges. If your generation doesn't become more involved in addressing these long-term challenges, you'll pay a big price in the future for failing to act. Namely, you'll face significantly higher tax burdens, fewer government benefits, and less choice to determine how government should respond to new and emerging needs and challenges.
- By taking a strategic, long-term view now, we can ready our government for the challenges of the future whether it's ensuring a decent standard of living for our seniors or protecting our vital interests in a world that grows smaller each day.
- Tackling these long-term challenges is one of the most challenging and important areas in government today. We're going to need people who are creative and forward thinking...who can look beyond current realities and see future possibilities.
- In his 1968 presidential campaign, Robert Kennedy spoke of the importance of vision, saying, "There are those who look at things the way they are and ask why ... I dream of things that never were and ask, why not." Again, I say to you, dare to make a difference.

Developing a Solid Reputation

- Bryant College has a long tradition of emphasizing clear thinking, sound judgment, and good character. Lately, the question of character has received a lot of play in the press. It's been reflected positively in the heroism of the police, firefighters, and other rescue workers who answered the call of duty on 9/11, and it's been reflected negatively in the betrayal of trust that's at the heart of the Enron scandal.
- Suddenly, we seem to have rediscovered the importance of qualities like courage, honesty, integrity, decency, morality, and compassion.
- My personal hero, former President Theodore Roosevelt, fondly known as TR, once said: "It is character that counts in a nation as a man."
- TR was a man of character, conscience, and conviction. He was a true leader and a real Renaissance man. He is the only person to win both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Medal of Honor. As our 26th and youngest president, he was an optimist who firmly believed in the potential of government to improve the lives of all its citizens.
- As a trustbuster, TR took on some of the nation's most powerful and ethically challenged corporate interests. And he won. As an environmentalist, he left us a legacy of great national parks with names like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon. As an internationalist, he promoted the building of the Panama Canal and personally led negotiations to secure peace in some of the most troubled parts of the world.
- Clearly, TR made a difference in many ways, and each of you can too if you put your mind to it.
- Life is full of difficult decisions, and the right choice isn't always the easy choice, or the popular choice. But whether we're talking about an individual or a corporation, principled choices based on sound ethical behavior are the surest way to a proud reputation...a reputation that will stand the test of time. As a result, don't hesitate to have the courage of your convictions.
- In this country, you have the freedom to make a name for yourself. The great part is that it's all up to you. The scary part is that it's all up to you.
- It's easy to forget that a reputation built over many years can be lost in seconds. Once you've lost your good name, it's hard to get it back. Just ask Enron! Just ask Arthur Andersen!
- TR got it exactly right when he said, "The one thing I want to leave my children is an honorable name."
- People with a good education, solid character, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude have unlimited potential. Your degree from Bryant is evidence of your good education. The rest is up to you!
- By earning your degrees, you've made a solid start. You already have one competitive advantage over the father of this country, George Washington, who did not have a college degree.

Making a Difference

- How can you really make a difference? The motto of the philosopher Socrates was "know thyself." Nearly 2,500 years later, this motto is still pretty good advice. It's important to understand your own values, motivations, abilities and interests. What causes inspire you? Which individuals do you hold in high esteem? Answers to these questions can help to unlock your future.
- In choosing a career that uses your MBA degree, it's crucial to look beyond the bottom line. A job that plays to your strengths and interests is more likely to make you happy, and you're more likely to be successful. Following your inner compass is the surest way to realize your full potential and to make sure you're on the right course.
- In going about your jobs and daily lives, it's important to heed a higher calling and to "lead by example." It's also important to realize that mortal things like "the law" and "accounting principles" establish the floor or minimum levels of professional conduct. In the end, the best simple rule is to have the courage and conviction to just do what is right!
- Don't be afraid to say what you mean, mean what you say, and tell it like it is! In addition, always do your best to deliver on your promises.
- Remember, the true test of integrity and positive personal behavior is what you choose to do when no one else is looking at you but God.
- Irrespective of the path you take - government, private industry, or the non-profit sector - do your best to make a real and lasting difference, and do your best to do the right thing all the time.
- As TR said, "Fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords." Graduates - the arena of life awaits you, and the future is yours for the making. Dare to make a difference!
- May God bless you, may God bless your families, may God bless Bryant College, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you.



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