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### Service to America: Address at the Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD

April 2, 2008

Thank you. I am very happy to be here. Annapolis holds a special place in my life, and in the years that have passed since my father drove me to the gates of the Naval Academy to begin my plebe year, memories of my experiences here are often bathed in the welcome haze of nostalgia for the time when I was brave and true and better looking than I am at present. But witnesses to my behavior here, a few of whom are present today, as well as a nagging conscience, have a tendency to interrupt my reverie for a misspent youth, and urge a more honest appraisal of my record and character here. In truth, my four years at the Naval Academy were not notable for exemplary virtue or academic achievement but, rather, for the impressive catalogue of demerits I managed to accumulate. By my reckoning, at the end of my second class year, I had marched enough extra duty to take me to Baltimore and back seventeen times -- which, if not a record, certainly ranks somewhere very near the top.

Never in my wildest flights of youthful fancy did I imagine I would one day be honored to give the commencement address at the Academy as I was some years ago. And, certainly, no matter how inflated was my self-regard as a midshipman, it could never have admitted the prospect that I would someday return to the banks of the Severn as a candidate for President of the United States. My old company officer, who for four years devoted himself to tracking my nocturnal sojourns outside the walls of the Academy and my other petty acts of insubordination, would have certainly shared my skepticism. But in the intervening years and experiences, I have learned what a young man seldom appreciates: that life is rich with irony and unexpected twists of fate, and is all the more fascinating for them. And I learned this, too: that my accomplishments are more a testament to my country, the land of opportunity, than they are to me. In America, everything is possible.

I had a difficult time my plebe year adjusting to the discipline imposed on me, which included, of course, deference to officers and instructors, but to other midshipmen, whose only accomplishment entitling them to my obedience, I thought at the time, was to have been born a year or more before me. I was something of a discipline problem to begin with. The problem being, I didn't like discipline. And that childish impulse that seemed then so important to my self-respect; to protecting the individualism I had been at pains to assert throughout my itinerant childhood, encouraged my irreverence to some of the customs of this place.

It's funny, now, how less self-assured I feel later in life than I did when I lived in the perpetual springtime of youth. Some of my critics allege that age hasn't entirely cost me my earlier conceits. All I can say to them is they should have known me then. But as the great poet, Yeats, wrote, "All that's beautiful drifts away, like the waters." I've lost some of the attributes that were the object of a young man's vanity. But there have been compensations, which I have come to hold dear.

If I had ignored some of the less important conventions of the Academy, I was careful not to defame its more compelling traditions: the veneration of courage and resilience; the honor code that simply assumed your fidelity to its principles; the homage paid to Americans who had sacrificed greatly for our country; the expectation that you, too, would prove worthy of your country's trust.

Appearances to the contrary, it was never my intention to mock a revered culture that expected better of me. Like any other midshipman, I wanted to prove my mettle to my contemporaries and to the institution that figured so prominently in my family history. My idiosyncratic methods amounted to little more than the continued expressions of the truculence I had used at other schools to fend off what I had wrongly identified as attacks on my dignity.

The Naval Academy was not interested in degrading my dignity. On the contrary, it had a more expansive conception of human dignity than I possessed when I arrived at its gates. The most important lesson I learned here was that to sustain my self-respect for a lifetime it would be necessary for me to have the honor of serving something greater than my self-interest.

When I left the Academy, I was not even aware I had learned that lesson. In a later crisis, I would suffer a genuine attack on my dignity, an attack, unlike the affronts I had exaggerated as a boy, that left me desperate and uncertain. It was then I would recall, awakened by the example of men who shared my circumstances, the lesson that the Academy in its venerable and enduring way had labored to impress upon me. It changed my life forever. I had found my cause: citizenship in the greatest nation on earth.

Like most people, when I reflect back on the adventures and joys of youth, I feel a longing for what is lost and cannot be restored. But though such happy pursuits prove ephemeral, something better can endure, and endure until our last moment on earth. And that is the honor you earn and the love you give when you sacrifice with others for a cause greater than yourself.

Our civilization's progress is accelerated by the information-technology revolution that ranks with the industrial revolution as a great pivot point in history. All around the world, the dynamics of the new economy: the internet, the communications revolution and globalization are transforming the way we work and create value; the way we govern ourselves -- or others presume to govern us; the way we live.

But even as we stand today, at the threshold of an age in which the genius of America will, I am confident, again be proven -- the genius that historian Frederick Turner called "that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism ... that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" -- many Americans are indifferent to or cynical about the virtues that our country claims. In part, it is attributable to the dislocations economic change causes; to the experience of Americans who have, through no fault of their own, been left behind as others profit as they never have before. In part, it is in reaction to government's mistakes and incompetence, and to the selfishness of some public figures who seek to shine the luster of their public reputations at the

expense of the public good. But for others, cynicism about our country, government, social and religious institutions seems not a reaction to occasions when they have been let down by these institutions, but because the ease which wealth and opportunity have given their lives led them to the mistaken conclusion that America, and the liberties its system of government is intended to protect, just aren't important to the quality of their lives.

I'm a conservative, and I believe it is a very healthy thing for Americans to be skeptical about the purposes and practices of public officials. We shouldn't expect too much from government -- nor should it expect too much from us. Self-reliance -- not foisting our responsibilities off on others -- is the ethic that made America great.

But when healthy skepticism sours into corrosive cynicism our expectations of our government become reduced to the delivery of services. And to some people the expectations of liberty are reduced to the right to choose among competing brands of designer coffee.

What is lost is, in a word, citizenship. For too many Americans, the idea of good citizenship does not extend beyond walking into a voting booth every two or four years and pulling a lever. And too few Americans demand of themselves even that first obligation of self-government.

But citizenship properly understood is what Ronald Reagan was talking about when he said that Americans "are a nation that has a government -- not the other way around." Citizenship is not just the imposition of the mundane duties of democracy. Nor is it the unqualified entitlement to the protections and services of the state.

Citizenship thrives in the communal spaces where government is absent. Anywhere Americans come together to govern their lives and their communities -- in families, churches, synagogues, museums, symphonies, the Little League, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Salvation Army or the VFW -- they are exercising their citizenship.

Citizenship is defined by countless acts of love, kindness and courage that have no witness or heraldry and are especially commendable because they are unrecorded.

Although it exists apart from government, citizenship is the habits and institutions that preserve democracy. It is the ways, small and large, we come together to govern ourselves. Citizenship is the responsible exercise of freedom, and is indispensable to the proper functioning of a democracy.

The English writer G.K. Chesterton once wrote that America is a "nation with the soul of a church." What he meant is that America is not a race or a people but an idea -- a place where the only requirement for membership is a belief in the principles of liberty, opportunity and equality under the law on which this nation was founded.

Citizenship is our acceptance of -- and our protection of -- these principles. It is the duties, the loyalties, the inspirations and the habits of mind that bind us together as Americans.

We are the heirs and caretakers of freedom; a blessing preserved with the blood of heroes down through the ages. One cannot go to Arlington Cemetery and see name upon name, grave upon grave, row upon row, without being deeply moved by the sacrifice made by those young men and women.

And those of us who live in this time, who are the beneficiaries of their sacrifice, dare not forget what they did and why they did it, lest we lose our own love of liberty.

Love of country, my friends, is another way of saying love of your fellow countrymen -- a truth I learned a long time ago in a country very different from ours.

That is the good cause that summons every American to service. If you find faults with our country, make it a better one. If you are disappointed with the mistakes of government, join its ranks and work to correct them. I hope more Americans would consider enlisting in our Armed Forces. I hope more would consider running for public office or working in federal, state and local governments. But there are many public causes where your service can make our country a stronger, better one than we inherited. Wherever there is a hungry child, a great cause exists. Where there is an illiterate adult, a great cause exists. Wherever there are people who are denied the basic rights of Man, a great cause exists. Wherever there is suffering, a great cause exists.

The good citizen and wise person pursues happiness that is greater than comfort, more sublime than pleasure. The cynical and indifferent know not what they miss. For their mistake is an impediment not only to our progress as a civilization but to their happiness as individuals.

As blessed as we are, no nation complacent in its greatness can long sustain it. We, too, must prove, as those who came before us proved, that a people free to act in their own interests, will perceive those interests in an enlightened way, will live as one nation, in a kinship of ideals, and make of our power and wealth a civilization for the ages, a civilization in which all people share in the promise and responsibilities of freedom.

Should we claim our rights and leave to others the duty to the ideals that protect them, whatever we gain for ourselves will be of little lasting value. It will build no monuments to virtue, claim no honored place in the memory of posterity, offer no worthy summons to the world. Success, wealth and celebrity gained and kept for private interest is a small thing. It makes us comfortable, eases the material hardships our children will bear, purchases a fleeting regard for our lives, yet not the self-respect that, in the end, matters most. But sacrifice for a cause greater than yourself, and you invest your life with the eminence of that cause, your self-respect assured.

All lives are a struggle against selfishness. All my life I've stood a little apart from institutions that I had willingly joined. It just felt natural to me. But if my life had shared no common purpose, it would not have amounted to much more than eccentric. There is no honor or happiness in just being strong enough to be left alone. As one of my potential opponents often observes, I've spent fifty years in the service of this country and its ideals. I have made many mistakes, and I have my share of regrets. But I've never lived a day, in good times or bad, that I wasn't grateful for the privilege. That's the benefit of service to a country that is an idea and a cause, a righteous idea and cause. America and her ideals helped spare me the worst consequences of the deficiencies in my character. And I cannot forget it.

When I was a young man, I thought glory was the highest attainment, and all glory was self-glory. My parents had tried to teach me otherwise, as did the Naval Academy. But I didn't understand the lesson until later in life, when I confronted challenges I never expected to face.

In that confrontation, I discovered that I was dependent on others to a greater extent than I had ever realized, but neither they nor

the cause we served made any claims on my identity. On the contrary, they gave me a larger sense of myself than I had ever had before. And I am a better man for it. I discovered that nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause that encompasses you but is not defined by your existence alone. And that has made all the difference, my friends, all the differences in the world. Thank you.

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