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Service to America: Address at Jacksonville, FL

April 3, 2008

Thank you. For many years in my life, I lacked a fixed address for any significant length of time. Jacksonville came closer to being a hometown for me than any place in the country. My family lived here before I went to war, and this is the place I came home to after the war. We lived here again in 1974 for two years, when I was Executive Officer, and then Commanding Officer of VA 174, the Replacement Air Group at Cecil Field. So it always feels a bit like a homecoming whenever I return here.

This place was never more special to me than during my unexpectedly long deployment overseas, when the good people of this place looked after my family in my absence. I have always been indebted to Florida friends and neighbors in Orange Park for taking such good care of my family while I was away.

Our neighbors in Orange Park, many of whom, but not all, were Navy families, were extraordinarily kind and generous while I was in Vietnam. They were the mainstay of my family's support. They helped with the maintenance of our home, took my children to sporting events, offered whatever counsel and support was needed, and generally helped keep my family together, body and soul, until I could get back to them. They were nothing less than an extended family to my family, and their love and concern were as much a mark of their good character as it was a blessing to the people they helped.

My daughter, Sidney, was an infant when I first left for Vietnam. She did not know me, or I her very well, when I returned many years later to find a bright and cheerful six year old little girl waiting for me. I, too, was a different person when we were reunited than I had been when we parted. Not in every respect, but certainly in important ways.

In the upheaval of war, that great leveler of ego and distinction, things change. War is a remorseless scavenger, hacking through the jungle of deceit, pretense, and self-delusion to find truth, some of it ugly, some of it starkly beautiful; to find virtue and expose iniquity where we never expected them to reside. No other human experience exists on the same plane. It is a surpassing irony of war, for all the horrors and heroism it occasions, it provides the soldier with every conceivable human experience. Experiences that usually take a lifetime to know are all felt, and felt intensely, in one brief passage of life. Anyone who loses a loved one knows what great sorrow feels like. And any one who gives life to a child knows what great joy feels like. The combat veteran knows what great loss and great joy feel like when they occur in the same moment, the same experience. It can be transforming.

In Vietnam, where I formed the closest friendships of my life, some of those friends never came home to the country they loved so well. I detest war. It might not be the worst thing to befall human beings, but it is wretched beyond all description. Not the valor with which it is fought nor the nobility of the cause it serves, can glorify war. Whatever gains are secured, it is loss the veteran remembers most keenly. Only a fool or a fraud sentimentalizes the merciless reality of war. However heady the appeal of a call to arms, however just the cause, we should still shed a tear for all that is lost when war claims its wages from us.

However glorious the cause, it does not define the experience of war. War mocks our idealized conceptions of glory, whether they are genuine and worthy or something less. War has its own truths. And if glory can be found in war, it is a different concept altogether. It is a hard-pressed, bloody, and soiled glory, steely and forbearing. It is decency and love persisting amid awful degradation, in unsurpassed suffering, misery, and cruelty. It is the discovery that we belong to something bigger than ourselves.

In the immediacy, chaos, destruction and shock of war, soldiers are bound by duty and military discipline to endure and overcome. Their duty and loyalty belong to their country. They find solace in their faith in God. But their strongest loyalty, the bond that cannot break, is to the cause that is theirs alone - each other. It is through loyalty to comrades in arms that they begin to understand that to love one's country is to love one's countrymen, and to serve the national ideal that commenced their personal transformation. When war is over, they might have the largest but not exclusive claim on the success of their nation's cause and seldom share in the blame for its failure. But their claim is shorn of all romance, all nostalgia for the suffering with which it was won. From that crucible they have but one prize, one honor: that they had withstood the savagery and losses of war and were found worthy by the men who stood with them.

This is the truth of war, of honor and courage. Before I went to war its meaning was obscure to me, hidden in the spare language of men who had gone to war before me and been changed forever by the experience. The Naval Academy, with its inanimate and living memorials to fidelity and valor, tried to teach this truth to me. But I had interpreted the lesson, as I had interpreted my father's example, within the limits of my vanity. I thought glory was the object of war, and all glory was self-glory.

No more. For I had learned the truth: there are greater pursuits than self-seeking. Glory is not a conceit. It is not a decoration for valor. It is not a prize for being the strongest, the most clever, or the boldest. Glory belongs to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to the cause, to your principles, to the people on whom you rely, and who rely on you in return. No misfortune, no injury, no humiliation can destroy it.

The quality of persevering for your own sake, for your reputation or your sense of personal honor is good but over valued. Persevering with others for a common goal is not only more satisfying in the end, but teaches you something about life you might not have known before, and can influence your direction in ways your own fortitude never could. I once thought I was man enough for almost any confrontation. In prison, I discovered I was not. I tried to use every personal resource I had to confound my captors,

and I wasn't enough in the end. But when I had reached the limit of my endurance, the men I had the honor of serving with picked me up, set me right, and sent me back into the fight. I became dependent on others to a greater extent than I had ever been before. And I am a better man for it. We had met a power that wanted to obliterate our identities, and the cause to which we rallied was our response: we are free men, bound inseparably together, and by the grace of God and not your sufferance we will have our freedom restored to us. I have never felt more powerfully free, more my own man, than when I was a small part of an organized resistance to the power that imprisoned us.

That lesson made me a better officer, too. When I came to Cecil Field and eventually assumed command of VA 174, the largest squadron in the Navy, the state of military readiness in the United States was very low. And my squadron's readiness was no exception. We had about fifty planes, and nearly half of them were in such bad shape they had been grounded. I was determined to improve the situation, but I knew my own determination wouldn't be sufficient to do so. I struck a deal with my superiors that if they allowed me to move parts from one plane to another, before my tour was finished we would have every one of them in the air. No plan to restore the squadron's readiness could have succeeded without the extraordinary determination and resourcefulness of the pilots, staff and crew I served with. They numbered nearly a thousand, and they were as highly committed, hardworking, innovative people as any officer ever had the honor to command. They worked diligently toward a common goal, and took pride in the achievements of a team and didn't view individual accomplishment as the primary focus of their energy. Of course, the squadron's purpose was to train aviators, but the men and women of VA 174 knew that they were serving a greater purpose: to demonstrate the resolve of the United States Navy to overcome the decline in morale and readiness that temporarily afflicted the military after the Vietnam War.

On the last day of my command, my Executive Officer and friend, Carl Smith, kept my promise to my superiors and took off in the last of the squadron's grounded planes. The plane was barely ready for the test and flew with its landing gear down. But we had achieved our goal. We had gotten every airplane off the ground, set a record for the longest flying hours without an accident, and received the first Meritorious Unit Citation ever awarded VA 174. The experience was the most rewarding assignment of my Navy career.

There are many qualities to military service that make it such a special profession. But among the most important is the ability to get things done no matter how difficult, confused or unexpected the situation. There is an old military maxim that battle plans never survive the first encounter with the enemy. Soldiers are taught to expect the unexpected and accept it, and revise, improvise, and fight their way through any adversity. That doesn't mean the soldier doesn't grumble or complain about unexpected changes in their fortunes, but they are trained to get things done no matter the circumstances.

That is an ethic that should imbue all public service in this country, and it should be the quality all Americans demand from their elected leaders. We are the most accomplished nation in history, and our system of government is superior to any other. But we have much to do in this historically pivotal era of great change and challenge, to ensure, as every preceding American generation has, that the country we leave our children is even better than the one we inherited.

To keep our nation prosperous, strong and growing we have to rethink, reform and reinvent: the way we educate our children; train our workers; deliver health care services; support retirees; fuel our transportation network; stimulate research and development; and harness new technologies.

To defend ourselves we must do everything better and smarter than we did before. We must rethink, renew and rebuild the structure and mission of our military; the capabilities of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies; the purposes of our alliances, the reach and scope of our diplomacy, and the capacities of all branches of government to defend us against the peril we now face. We need to marshal all elements of American power: our military, economy, investment, trade and technology. We need to strengthen our alliances, and build support in other nations, which must, whether they believe it or not, confront the same threat to their way of life that we do.

We must also prepare, across all levels of government, far better than we have done, to respond quickly and effectively to another terrorist attack or natural calamity. I am not an advocate of big government, and the private sector has an important role to play in homeland security. But when Americans confront a catastrophe, either natural or man-made, their government, across jurisdictions, should be organized and ready to deliver bottled drinking water to dehydrated babies and rescue the aged and infirm trapped in a hospital with no electricity.

We can leave these difficult problems to our unlucky successors, after they've grown worse, and harder to fix. Or we can bring all parties to the table, and hammer out principled solutions to the challenges of our time:

to strengthen our military, intelligence, diplomacy, and law enforcement and use the power of American ideals and commerce to win the war against violent extremists, and help the majority of Muslims who believe in progress and peace to win the struggle for the soul of Islam;

to balance the federal budget not with smoke and mirrors but by encouraging economic growth and preventing government from spending your money on things it shouldn't; to hold it accountable for the money it does spend on services that only government can provide in ways that don't fail and embarrass you;

to save Social Security and Medicare on our watch without the tricks, band-aid solutions, lies and posturing that have failed us for too long while the problem became harder and harder to solve;

to make our tax code simpler, fairer, flatter, more pro-growth and pro-jobs;

to reduce our dangerous dependence on foreign sources of oil with an energy policy that encourages American industry and technology to make our country safer, cleaner and more prosperous by leading the world in the use, development and discovery of alternative sources of energy;

to open new markets to American goods and services, create more and better jobs for the American worker and overhaul unemployment insurance and our redundant and outmoded programs for assisting workers who have lost a job that's not coming back to find a job that won't go away;

to help Americans without health insurance acquire it without bankrupting the country, and ruining the quality of American health care that is the envy of the world;

to make our public schools more accountable to parents and better able to meet the critical responsibility they have to prepare our children for the challenges they'll face in the world they'll lead.

We are not a perfect nation. Our history has had its moments of shame and profound regret. But what we have achieved in our

brief history is irrefutable proof that a nation conceived in liberty will prove stronger, more decent and more enduring than any nation ordered to exalt the few at the expense of the many or made from a common race or culture or to preserve traditions that have no greater attribute than longevity.

But 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, capable of the work history has assigned us. Nothing is inevitable in America. Nothing. We're the world's leader, and leaders don't pine for the past and dread the future. We make the future better than the past. We don't hide from history. We make history. That, my friends, is the essence of hope in America, hope built on courage, and faith in the values that have made us great. I intend to make my stand on those principles and help move this country forward, to our future greatness, and trust in the judgment, decency and resolve of the people I have served all my life.

Thank you.

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