

**REMARKS BY:**

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COMMENCEMENT**

**SHOW ME CENTER  
CAPE GIRARDEAU, MISSOURI**

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GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY: Please take your seats. Thank you. Thank you for that marvelous introduction. My mother would be delighted with the introduction. My mother-in-law would still be skeptical, but that's another story.

Dr. Dobbins, thank you very much, sir, for the opportunity to be with you all today. Quite frankly, I can't think of another place I'd rather spend a Saturday afternoon than in the heartland celebrating the graduation of these great young men and women out here today.

I'm extremely proud to be a product of this locale and to be present with you today. The Midwestern values of hard work and common sense

(Audio break)

– when you come back here. I'm delighted to be here and to be a part of this family celebration here today.

Speaking of family, I'd be remiss if I didn't introduce some of mine who are here today. Folks drove down from the town of Sainte Genevieve. In spite of the name, Sainte Genevieve's kind of a tough little place. There are folks up there that still think that the movie *Deliverance* is a love story. (Laughter.) But it's great to have a mother-in-law and her sister and some of the folks here.

Folks, there are a lot of things I want to say today. First of all, I want to talk to the graduates about a sense of perspective and how things improve over time. It was many, many years ago, and a couple thousand miles west of here that I first laid my eyes on a Marine four-star general. I can tell you that this guy was older than dirt, you know. He had deep furrows in his face. His hair was white and he was kind of bent over when he walked, and I thought, "this guy, he's like Methuselah." The second thing I would say

about him is that I don't remember much about what he said because he mumbled a lot. And the third thing is that this was just, again, one ugly human being. I mean, his ears were too big for his head. His nose was broke, and he was just not what you would call a satisfactory human being.

I want you to know, however, that your perspective over time will change. Because I now appreciate that this general was, in fact, in the prime of his life. (Laughter.) He was in fact quite articulate, and in a rugged sort of way, maybe even a handsome rascal. (Laughter.) So you all need to understand that what you see and say now may change as you reach additional levels of maturity.

Folks, indeed, my experiences have been that people no longer remember who was the guest speaker at their graduation, and will remember for even a shorter period of time what he had to say. So, I'm going to be necessarily brief today with my comments to you. But I would like to offer just a few thoughts for the graduates—brief messages, if you will, as you phase from labor to management in life.

First, you should be extremely proud of yourself as graduates from Southeast Missouri State University. You've already demonstrated some of those great Midwestern values that I spoke of earlier, but you've also exhibited intelligence, good judgment, and persistence. Otherwise, you wouldn't be sitting here today.

Some of you may be saying to yourself, "okay, I did good. This is a proud day. I have arrived." Young people, enjoy the day—now you have them. But tomorrow, as they say, is the first of the rest of your life. And I would offer that perhaps you haven't arrived, perhaps you've just started—because questions will abound: "Where am I going to go? What am I going to do? How much money am I going to make?"

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the answers are—like so many other things in life—"it depends." Today, you join 18 percent of your fellow Americans who hold college degrees. Your degree and your status as a SEMO graduate will do the same thing that a degree from Harvard or Duke or Northwestern will do for others. It will get your foot in the door. After that, it will be performance that counts.

You know, one of the great things about this wonderful country of ours is that it is a democracy. But it is also a meritocracy. How much you produce, how novel your ideas, and how well you motivate those who work for you is going to be those things that your boss is looking for. And those qualities will immediately trump how tall you are, how handsome or pretty you may be, or where you came from. But as Southeast Missouri unleashes yet another graduation class on the world, be confident that wherever you go, and whatever you do, the lessons that are learned here at Cape—socially, educationally, personally—will keep you in good stead.

Let me share a little vignette with you, if I can, that emphasizes the point. As background, all services have what they call a "command screening program." That is to say that boards are brought together to select lieutenant colonels and colonels, the best of

which, to command our formations. It's a real quality cut for those who seek to be career officers. When I was the commanding general of the I Marine Expeditionary Force in Camp Pendleton, California, a number of my subordinate commanders came to me and introduced themselves as SEMO graduates. One day, out of curiosity I had my personnel officer do a search. And the question was this: "as we cross the line of departure into Iraq in 2003, what number of commanders—lieutenant colonel and above—came from which colleges and universities?" The answer was: the Naval Academy—three; Citadel—three; Virginia Military Institute—two; Texas A & M—two; and Southeast Missouri State University—six. (Applause.) Now, ladies and gentlemen, don't ask me to explain it, because I can't. But I would leave with you the thought process that if there's one thing in life that you can be sure of, it is performance that counts.

My next point deals with leadership. As I intimated earlier, as a college graduate, you will most certainly have people in your charge. And I entreat that will be a major factor in your own success. And I don't believe that colleges and universities, in general terms, do a very good job teaching leadership. Now leadership is both art and science, and clearly there are ways to learn leadership. You can read about it in biographies. You see it exhibited, perhaps, in your daily lives. And you exercise it yourself, as I suspect many of you have, in the campus organizations here at Southeast. Let me offer you just three little pearls of wisdom, if I can, that come from the Marine Corps book on leadership.

*First, expect the unexpected.* Graduates, I know you've been counseled that you need to establish your goals and ambitions in life, and then map out a plan for yourself on how you're going to get there. What I want to alert you to, is that—about your plan—is that if something can go wrong, it will. In the Marine Corps, we say it that "few plans survive first contact with the enemy." The question becomes, what are you going to do about it?

One option is to immediately give up. But what a good leader does is to maintain momentum along the path that he or she has chosen. To do that, you build flexibility into your plan. Expect the unexpected, and think through in advance how you're going to deal with it. Next, a good leader creates options to his plan, and has several decision points along the way. At those decision points, evaluate and be ready to adjust if your plan isn't working. Then, of course, you have to oversee or supervise your plan. Only you have a clear vision as to what you want to do, and that requires you to personally see it through.

*Second, in the absence of orders, attack.* By that, I mean be aggressive. Where you have the latitude to make decisions, take it to the firewall. Be bold, but be smart. Understand that there may be risks associated with an aggressive course of action, but you should work to mitigate those risks, not shrink from them. Others may find it more comforting to await instruction or be sure that they're headed in the right direction, but our society rewards initiative. We teach our Marine lieutenants that it's far better to have to ask forgiveness for having gone to far, than to ask permission to get started.

*Officers eat last.* In our Corps, field rations are issued in a little sealed plastic bag after they've been pre-cooked and then dehydrated. That gets pretty old, pretty fast. Occasionally, we'll have hot chow brought in from the mess hall either to the field or delivered in combat. When we do, out of pure respect for those young Marines who are doing the most fighting and the hardest work, officers eat only after all the troops have been served. Many is the time when the Company Gunny failed to bring enough food to the field or the lads were just hungry, because my officers and I would have a cup of coffee and a few scraps of bread. But I wouldn't change a thing.

In your leadership role, I offer to you the symbology: eat last. Take care of those who work for you to the absolute best of your ability. Never ask them to do something that you wouldn't be more than willing to do yourself. And if the job is especially difficult, lead them through it with your own very positive example. Take my word for it. The result will be a fierce loyalty to you and what you stand for, as well as the belief that together you can do anything.

My last point, graduates. *You join the workforce of a nation at war.* I have an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that our American public does not fully understand the nature of the fight that we're engaged in. I don't think that we in the military or the federal government, for that matter, have properly explained the real danger that exists. We're at war with a growing movement of religious extremism. Whether or not we want to accept it, Afghanistan and Iraq are the first battles of that war. If you win the first battles, the war is shorter. If you lose those first battles, the war is only longer and tougher to win.

If it's true that our nation doesn't think that the war in Iraq is part of the war on terrorism, it doesn't matter, because the enemy does. If we as a people think that we can simply walk away—like we did in Vietnam or Somalia—without impact, the enemy doesn't believe that at all. He attacked us first, and he has said openly that he will attack us again and again until we are exhausted and bankrupt.

Recently in Ramadi, we asked what he would do when American forces had withdrawn from Iraq of a captured al Qaeda. He remarked in good English that that was a foolish question. He said, "Of course, we will follow you to America." Ladies and gentlemen, please understand that our enemy today has a goal of world domination. If he can kick us out of the Middle East, he intends to use oil as a weapon. He plans to destroy Israel, and the world that we know today will not be the same world that your children and grandchildren have to endure.

*Now, on the other side of the coin, we have a great, young generation of Americans out there who are more than willing and capable to take the fight to the enemy.* Old guys like me underestimated them once. We call them the "joystick generation", and thought that they were maybe soft from lack of discipline, not enough team sports or outdoor activity. We were concerned that they might not make good soldiers or Marines.

Ladies and gentlemen, we could not have been more wrong. I've seen those young people in combat perform acts of raw courage; selflessness in team play that would bring tears to your eyes. They are good, and they get it, and they think that they're making a difference. I suggest to you that our service, as indeed our nation, is in great shape for a long time to come as these young men and women continue to reach increasing levels of responsibility.

Graduates, families, and loved ones, college faculty, I will close by asking you to do just a couple of things. *One is to develop a more complete understanding of the threat that we face.* It is real. It is sinister, and if not defeated, threatens to change the world as we know it. Cast your net broadly, beyond our own media, to gain awareness. Listen to those who have been there, and if you have the opportunity, talk to the troops. I am convinced that a knowledgeable American public who calls our leadership to do the right thing in this crisis, whatever that course of action may be.

*The second thing is, please continue to support the troops.* These brave young men and women out there deserve your support. In a nation of now over 300 million, only 3.1 million—just over one percent—wear the uniforms of the United States military. They have stepped forward to defend our nation at a crucial time in our history. During Vietnam, when many of our countrymen didn't agree with the government's policy, they unfortunately painted everybody with the same brush, and treated our men and women shamefully. I believe our nation has matured a great deal since then, and now you can disagree with our policy if you must, but still support the troops. I ask you to do so. Keep them in your prayers, help to nurture them and their families if they are wounded, and insist that they have the best gear available to accomplish the mission and come back safely.

Graduates, again, my congratulations. Families, well done. Thank you for the invitation to be with you today and for the opportunity to come home. God bless each and every one of you and may God bless America.

(Applause.)

(END)

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