

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Commencement Address at Maine Maritime Academy

Speaker:
General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.,
Chairman,
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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GENERAL JOSEPH F. DUNFORD JR.: President Brennan, ladies and gentlemen, and most importantly to the class of 2016, you'd expect me to say it, but it's an absolute honor to join you here today. And I'd like to begin by joining the provost and President Brennan in thanking the faculty, the staff, the family members, and the mentors who are here. Your support has made today possible for each of the degree recipients and I know you're very proud of the young men and women sitting before us today and also their accomplishments.

You know this is Mother's Day weekend and unless I get in trouble at home, I want to recognize one special group of people here today, and that's the mothers in the audience. And for those who are mothers, please rise, and I know that some have lost their moms along the way and know that they are also in our thoughts and prayers. So if the moms in the audience would please rise and be recognized, I'd appreciate it. (Applause).

And you know, finally I'd like to express my personal condolences to the Maine Maritime community for those lost at sea on October 1, 2015 aboard the SS El Faro. As we celebrate today, I know those lost and their families are in our thoughts and prayers.

As I was preparing my remarks earlier this week, I had occasion to recall my own graduation from another New England school as the president mentioned, St. Michael's College in Vermont. It was 39 years ago this month and I can still remember quite a bit of detail.

That morning, prior to commencement ceremony, I was one of two students commissioned in the Marine Corps before family and friends. I can still remember taking the oath of office and exchanging the first salute with the Marine staff sergeant. Some of you will have that opportunity later today, and I'm sure you'll find the experience equally unforgettable.

I can remember walking across the campus to the graduation ceremony and being surrounded by my fellow students. Like this morning, there was a lot of excitement in the air. I also remember our commencement speaker. By coincidence, it was Senator Margaret Chase Smith from the state of Maine. A name familiar for most here, and for whom a building on campus is named, in fact, the building we assembled the faculty in this morning before coming over to the ceremony.

By the time I graduated, Senator Smith was an iconic figure. One speech she gave on the Senate floor is widely recognized as one of the most significant speeches in Senate history. Unfortunately, I cannot remember a word Senator Smith said to me and my fellow classmates in May of 1977, but at the time she spoke, my mind was miles away from Winooski, Vermont. I had enjoyed college, my parents might tell you a bit too much, but I was ready to move on with my life. Mentally, I had already made the break with the college phase of my life, and I suspect that many of you here today share that sentiment.

So with that in mind, I've challenged myself to say something this morning that's relevant to those of you that are graduating. Something you may actually remember at least until tomorrow. (Laughter). I'm going to accomplish my mission by sharing a few thoughts about leadership. And I'm going to ask you, the Class of 2016, to accomplish your mission by staying

with me just for a few minutes, and perhaps be a little more attentive than I was at my own commencement speech.

I chose to talk about leadership this morning because I believe we should expect leadership from the men and women who will leave here today and forever be proud to call themselves Mariners. We should expect leaders from graduates of an institution that has a mission to empower students to take on leadership roles and enable success in the global economy. And we should expect leadership from graduates of a school that's ranked as the number one public college in the country for two years in a row.

One of the qualities that all great leaders share is moral courage, the ability to think for yourself and the willingness to do the right thing regardless of the consequences. I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, but that characteristic defined my commencement speaker [inaudible] Margaret Chase Smith.

Senator Smith was born in 1897. She was the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress. Only a handful of women held seats in the House when she joined in 1940. And for over a decade, she was the only woman to serve in the Senate as a result of winning a general election. She was a trailblazer with many admirable qualities, but it was the moral courage she demonstrated in 1950 that established her as a truly extraordinary leader.

In 1950, the nation's confidence was shaken by financial trouble, the loss of China to communism, and Russia's success at developing an atomic weapon. In that context, the political opportunist, Senator Joseph McCarthy, took advantage of what Senator Smith called the four horsemen of fear, ignorance, bigotry and smear. McCarthy had embarked on a wide-sweeping, anti-communist crusade that unfairly called into question the patriotism and integrity of many good Americans. He literally destroyed lives and careers with rumor and innuendo. While many disagreed with McCarthy's unfair character assassinations and broad-sweeping accusations, no one in the Senate, and very few in the nation, had the courage to take on Senator McCarthy. It was a dark time in our nation's history.

And then, on June 1st, 1950, Senator Margaret Chase Smith took to the Senate floor and delivered a speech she described as a declaration of conscience. For many reasons, it was a bold step for her to take. She was a very junior senator from the same party as McCarthy. At the time, McCarthy was very popular in New England. And as the only woman in the Senate, she was under extreme scrutiny in a period when many believed women had no place in politics. When she delivered that speech, Senator Smith was well-aware that she was risking her reputation, and her very political career. But she had looked at the evidence behind McCarthy's accusations and concluded that what he was doing was wrong and harmful to our nation.

And so she moved to the Senate floor alone, and she took on Joseph McCarthy. And after her speech, through her example, others began to speak out, and the dark chapter of McCarthyism was eventually closed. Senator Smith knew what it meant to be a leader. She knew that being a leader meant doing the right thing, even when it's hard. In her own words, the right thing is not always the popular and easy thing. Standing for right when it's unpopular is the true test of moral courage. Mariners, future leaders, you won't all have a moment in your lives

as consequential as Senator Smith. But you'll all have moments when standing for right is hard. When that moment comes, I ask you to remember the example of Senator Margaret Chase Smith from Maine. And I'm sure her memory will help put your own challenge in context and enable you to pass the test.

Another quality that I've found in great leaders is the commitment to something greater than themselves, a willingness to put the mission and the needs of their subordinates ahead of their own wants or desires. I've had the privilege of serving with a number of men and women who embodied selfless service. One of those individuals was Lieutenant Matt Lynch, United States Marine Corps. Matt was the product of a family with a deep tradition of service. His brother and dad had been Marines. His dad went on to a distinguished career in the FBI. Matt was smart, he was athletic, and he was personable. He had a tremendous sense of humor. He would have succeeded in any walk of life.

Matt was one of my Marines there in Operation Iraqi Freedom. And he was one of the first Marines to cross into Iraq in March of 2003. In the fall of 2003, he returned to California. And the next spring, Matt's unit was still back in California, but many other units from our command were back in Iraq and had suffered heavy casualties. Matt was one of the few lieutenants who volunteered to leave his unit and join another unit in Iraq that needed a leader. A few months later, after his second combat deployment in less than 18 months, Matt returned to the United States for well-deserved rest, leave, and a reunion with his family.

Before he departed on leave, he went to visit the Marines from his first deployment. And they, by this time, were headed back to Iraq, but they didn't have a lieutenant. Matt immediately volunteered to fill the gap. And then he called home. And you can imagine his family was very disappointed he was not going to make it back home for the reunion. Matt himself was personally disappointed about that. In the course of the call his dad said: Matt, you've already been over there twice. Isn't it time to take a rest? Isn't it time for somebody else to go?

And Matt responded: Dad, those are my friends. Those are my Marines. I've learned a lot. I know I can help them accomplish the mission and bring them home safely. I have to go back. They need me. So Matt returned to Iraq. By every account, Matt was a source of great inspiration to his Marines. There is nothing Matt Lynch's Marines wouldn't do for him, because they knew there was nothing Matt Lynch wouldn't do for them. In November, 2004, Matt Lynch was killed in Ramadi leading his Marines and helping to ensure that they return home to their families. And because of Matt Lynch's leadership, over 30 Marines did return home to their families.

Mariners, future leaders, few of you are going to serve on active duty in the United States military or be in the position to make the ultimate sacrifice for our nation or for your subordinates. But most of you will lead others in the merchant marine industry, education, or government. And I hope when you lead you remember the story of Matt Lynch, if only to remember that when you're a leader it's not about you. If you lead in the spirit of Matt Lynch, if you genuinely care for others and you take care of them, they'll take care of you and you'll find success. And you will enjoy the success of accomplishment that can only come from inspiring others to excellence.

Now, those of you who are still with me may have a hard time identifying with my examples. You may have actually taken a deep gulp and wondered if being a leader requires being like Margaret Chase Smith or Lieutenant Matt Lynch. Right now, you may feel like you did on that fall day four years ago when you did the ship jump, and you found it hard to imagine that you may actually be sitting here four years later. And today, you may be finding it – sort of finding it hard to think of yourself as a leader in the future.

But in all sincerity, if you have those concerns, I don't share them, because what I've learned in my 39 years of active duty is that extraordinary leaders are actually ordinary men and women who make a commitment to excellence. Leaders are men and women who recognize that there is no "I" in the word "team". Leaders are men and women who simply dig down deep and do what's right, even when there's a voice inside of them that says to take the easy way. I don't share your concerns because I can look at the generations of Mariners who sat right where you sit this morning, and have gone on to be leaders of consequence, Mariners who have left their mark in a wide range of endeavors from serving on the sea to founding a corporation.

Mariners, class of 2016, in the interest of time I didn't describe the challenges currently facing our nation. But from a security perspective alone, today's environment has been described as the most volatile and complex since World War II. And the pace of change is unprecedented. Navigating in the days ahead is going to take leadership. And your generation of leaders will play an increasingly important role. Our education system, our military, our merchant marine, the private sector, and our government all need strong leadership. And as Mariners, you're uniquely capable of providing that leadership.

I'll close by making just a simple request to the class of 2016. Regardless of where life takes you, have the moral courage to do what's right, even when it's tough. Commit to being part of something bigger than yourself. And in the end, perhaps inspired by the story of Margaret Chase Smith or Lieutenant Matt Lynch, be a leader of consequence. I will tell you sincerely, thank you for the opportunity to be with you and your families here this morning. I am genuinely proud just to be here among you this morning. God bless you all in your endeavors. I wish you the best as you become leaders of consequence. And Semper Fidelis. (Applause.)

(END)