

# Dare To Make a Difference!

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Based on a Commencement Address  
by the Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States  
Before Bryant College  
Smithfield, Rhode Island

May 17, 2002

My congratulations to you, 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 first-hand 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 touches on three topics: (1) the importance of public service and looking forward, (2) building a solid reputation, and (3) making a difference.

I believe that we should all live and work by certain principles, standards, or core values. They can serve as a foundation and touchstone for how we live our lives and make our decisions. Bryant College has an impressive list of core values: high standards of civility, the sacredness of the person, service to others, and affirmation of both tradition and change.

My agency, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), has its own set of core values: accountability, integrity, and reliability. They guide GAO both externally, in providing services to its client—the U.S. Congress—and internally, in GAO's efforts to be a model employer. When you come to Washington, and I urge you to do so, you'll see our core values displayed over the doors to our building. They're also on our letterhead, business cards, and the famous GAO "blue-cover" reports. More important, 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 important, 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 servants. 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. My challenge to you today is to determine your own core values 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 that 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 41 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 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 prompts 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.

In observing the reactions of many Americans to the events of 9-11, I’m reminded of psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. 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 about 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 and at different stages in life. If you do, I'm confident it will be a decision you'll 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, people 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 whom you'll never meet. It's a calling in which individuals and teams are capable of changing the future.

### **Looking Forward**

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 to alert policymakers to long-term challenges facing the nation. Private industry, the nonprofit sector, and state and local government will all play roles in addressing these long-term challenges, but it's the federal government that will often have to take the lead.

September 11th 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. These efforts will take time and will cost a lot of money.

But the United States also 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 take a few moments to mention some these challenges.

We 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 have 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 basic humanity.

In many respects, our quality of life has never been better. We are living longer, we are better educated, and we are more likely to own our own homes. But, as you probably know from your own families, we are increasingly concerned about improving our public schools, navigating gridlocked city streets, balancing work and family obligations, and 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. 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 in deciding how government should respond to emerging needs.

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 important jobs in government today. We're going to need people who are creative and forward-thinking, people who can look beyond current realities and see future possibilities.

In his 1968 presidential campaign, Robert F. 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!

### **What's in a Name?**

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, 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 ever to have won both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Medal of Honor.

As our 26<sup>th</sup> 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 an institution, principled choices based on sound ethics are the surest way to a proud reputation—a reputation that will stand the test of time.

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, strong work ethic, and positive attitude have unlimited potential. Your degree from Bryant is proof 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 never went to college.

## **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. Understand your own values, motivations, abilities, and interests. What causes inspire you? Which individuals do you hold in high esteem? Answers to these questions are the keys to unlocking your future.

In choosing a career that uses your MBA degree, 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, heed a higher calling and “lead by example.” Remember that human rules, such as “the law” or “accounting principles,” establish only a floor or minimum level of professional conduct. In the end, the best approach is to have the courage of your convictions and simply do what’s right.

Don’t be afraid to say what you mean, mean what you say, and tell it like it is. And always do your best to deliver on your promises. Remember, the truest test of character 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!

## **BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID M. WALKER**

*David M. Walker became the seventh Comptroller General of the United States and began a 15-year term when he took his oath of office in November 1998. As Comptroller General, Mr. Walker is the nation's chief accountability officer and head of the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), a legislative branch agency founded in 1921. GAO's mission is to help improve the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government for the American people. Before his appointment as Comptroller General, Mr. Walker had extensive executive-level experience in both government and private industry. Between 1989 and 1998, Mr. Walker worked at Arthur Andersen LLP, where he was a partner and global managing director of the human capital services practice based in Atlanta, Georgia. While a partner at Arthur Andersen, Mr. Walker served as a public trustee for Social Security and Medicare from 1990 to 1995. Before joining Arthur Andersen, Mr. Walker served in various senior government positions, including Assistant Secretary of Labor for Pension and Welfare Benefit Programs from 1987 to 1989 and Acting Executive Director of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation in 1985. His earlier technical, professional, and business experience was with Price Waterhouse, Coopers & Lybrand and Source Services Corporation, an international human resources consulting and search firm. Mr. Walker is a certified public accountant. He has a B.S. degree in accounting from Jacksonville University, a Senior Management in Government Certificate in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and an honorary doctorate from Bryant College. He serves in many other leadership roles in government, the accounting profession, and the not-for-profit sector. He is married to the former Mary Etheredge, and they have two adult children—a daughter, Carol, and a son, Andy.*

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