

Public Service:
The Chance to Remake Our World

By the Honorable Gene Dodaro,
Comptroller General of the United States
Before the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy
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Thank you, Mary [Drach], for that kind introduction. I would also like to thank Dean Harding for inviting me to address this year's graduating class of the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. My congratulations to each of today's graduates on your significant achievements. It is an honor to be able to share this special day with you, your families, and friends. The U.S. Government Accountability Office, has a special connection with the University of Virginia; first, we've been fortunate to have recruited a number of your students, both as interns and permanent employees. And secondly, we share common values of striving for analytical excellence and the highest standards of integrity.

As you look toward your future, it is important to keep in context not only the world in which we live today, but also the one you hope for in the future. Great leaders always look ahead even when they are confronting serious problems. For example, 80 years ago in May 1932, facing the profound challenges of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the graduating class of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. FDR told the graduates, "Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of remaking the world which you will find before you." Now is your time to seize that opportunity.

That generation fought fascism and economic hardship and handed down to us an America that today continues to be a land of unique and nearly boundless opportunity. With these promising opportunities come

daunting challenges as the Nation undergoes a period of significant change. GAO's strategic plan for serving the Congress and the country highlights key trends affecting the United States and its place in the world. These include:

- evolving security threats;
- urgent fiscal sustainability and debt challenges;
- economic recovery and restored job growth;
- changing dynamics of global interdependence and shifts in power;
- advances in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics;
- increasing impacts of networks and virtualization;
- shifting roles in government and governance; and
- demographic and societal changes confronting the young and old.

More than ever, a broad strategic approach is essential to governing well. And, frankly, there really isn't enough long-term thinking in our national government.

But even with a strategic vision, there are in my view five factors to turn any vision into reality. Those factors are perspective, persistence, preparation, people, and participation.

By perspective, I mean understanding the big picture and the implications of our globalized world. Economics, trade, politics, information flows, public health, and many other human activities are now linked as never before. The recent financial crisis vividly illustrated the extent to which economics, trade, and information flows have become inextricably linked.

Additionally, given the global interconnectivities of financial markets and institutions, national reforms and international cooperation are both

pivotal to addressing the underlying issues that contributed to the recent turmoil. Major reforms are underway in the United States, and GAO has a major role to play in evaluating their progress. Moreover, we are working with other national audit offices around the world to increase understanding and cooperation on national and international reforms, such as adherence to new institutional standards for bank capital requirements.

Of course, interdependence today goes beyond the global financial markets and flows of capital. Food safety is a case in point. Much of the seafood, fruits, and vegetables we eat now comes from foreign sources. The problem is that the U.S. food safety system was designed for domestic production. In the face of rapid shifts in production and trade, our regulatory agencies are struggling to protect the public from unsafe goods.

Similarly, in the medical products area, the Food and Drug Administration estimates that foreign manufacturers now account for 80 percent of the ingredients in prescription drugs. That's why GAO has put oversight of food safety and medical products on our high-risk list, which includes areas of government in need of broad based transformation.

Another factor that's essential to achieving a strategic vision is persistence, or sustained long-term effort. My experience has been that progress in government often needs to be attained through incremental change. That's not a bad thing. With some persistence and a willingness to work with others, a series of small steps can lead to real and lasting change and pay off in a big way.

GAO's high-risk list is a case in point. With the start of each new Congress, GAO issues a report on federal areas vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement or needing broad-based transformation. Our latest list presents 30 areas ripe for reform – from

the Interior Department's management of oil and gas leases to the Pentagon's acquisition of weapon systems.

Since we started the high-risk list 20 years ago, more than a third of the cited areas have improved enough to be dropped from the list. Vital to such progress is sustained congressional attention, priority by the Office of Management and Budget on behalf of the President, and effective leadership by the federal entities involved.

A third factor is preparation. I'm talking about planning ahead. At GAO, we try to alert policymakers to emerging trends likely to shape American society and decisions facing policymakers.

A key example is our aging population. This very day, over 8,000 baby boomers will turn 65, and on average between now and 2029, 10,000 people a day in the United States will achieve that milestone. GAO's done considerable work on the impact of demographics on Social Security, healthcare and other federal programs, and, ultimately, the current unsustainable long-term fiscal path of federal finances.

The recent financial crisis also brought home the need for people to prepare for the future —whether it's saving for college or planning for retirement. We at GAO have initiated a multi-pronged strategy to address financial literacy issues. Under this effort, we will continue to evaluate federal efforts that directly promote financial literacy. GAO will also encourage research into various financial literacy initiatives to evaluate their relative effectiveness. In addition, we will look for opportunities to enhance financial literacy as an integral component of regular federal interactions with the public. Finally, GAO has recently instituted a program to empower its own employees, which includes an internal website with information on personal financial matters and links to important information.

Another area where preparation is key is in dealing with new security threats. GAO has issued more than 1,200 reports and testimonies on

homeland security since 9/11 and has made more than 1,600 recommendations to strengthen agency operations. On the 10th anniversary of 9/11, we issued a major report describing the Department of Homeland Security's progress to date and the work still remaining to prevent, defend against, and respond to terrorist attacks against the United States.

Additionally, when it comes to a strategic vision, the importance of people cannot be overstated. As Comptroller General, I spend a lot of time getting to know our employees and trying to match their strengths and interests with GAO's needs. Having the right person in the right job makes a huge difference. That alone probably counts for 75 percent of success.

People come to GAO, and many stay because the work is so interesting. Still, you have to create a work environment where people feel that they're learning and growing professionally. It's also important to create and nurture an inclusive environment where diversity is cultivated as an organizational strength.

Last year, GAO placed third among large federal agencies in the Partnership for Public Service's "Best Places to Work" rankings. We were number one in diversity. Those rankings matter because they're based on employee job satisfaction and whether our people would recommend GAO as a place to work.

Finally, a strategic vision requires participation. By participation, I'm really talking about citizen engagement, which can take many forms—everything from voter turnout to federal service. Successful government depends on public participation.

I'm here to say that government can and does make a difference in the lives of our fellow citizens.

I joined government back in the early 1970s. Watergate and the Vietnam War were on everyone's minds then. I did not want to sit back and just

criticize government. I wanted to be part of the solution and help improve public trust and confidence in government.

Today, when public discourse can sometimes be highly polarized, and too often people blame government for many problems, it's helpful to remember that dedicated federal employees do make a tremendous positive difference in the lives of our citizens.

And that's where men and women like all of you come in. Across government today, we need leaders with sound values, leaders who can think strategically and creatively. They'll need to work smarter and, in some cases, adjust to doing more with less.

Government managers at the local, state, and federal levels will need to take responsibility for developing innovative approaches and creative solutions to many of the challenges I've mentioned. By being proactive, managers can, to a great extent, manage the changes that are coming, rather than let those changes manage them.

Government needs people who can approach problems in new and innovative ways and anticipate future possibilities. At a time of iPads and on-line tax returns, the census is still taken on paper. We need the next Steve Jobs of the world who can think creatively to bring that talent to government. This challenge will become more urgent in the future as large numbers of federal workers begin to retire.

Today's problems won't be solved overnight. But in the past, the American people have always come together for the sake of the greater good. And their contributions and sacrifices have helped make our nation stronger.

Your school's namesake, Frank Batten, forged an impressive career in communications. He believed in the power of education to transform

our society, not only the corporate world but also our civic life. As your leaders say, the Batten School encourages its graduates “to act vigorously, effectively, and ethically on behalf of the common good.”

In 1932, the same year FDR spoke at Oglethorpe University, Albert Einstein was asked for his definition of a successful life. Einstein replied, “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

I know some of you may be heading off to jobs at government agencies, or on Capitol Hill, or at non-profits or private firms. Regardless of your immediate plans, I’d encourage all of you to consider public service at some point in your careers, whether it’s starting out as an entry-level employee or joining an agency later on as a mid-career manager or a senior executive. Public service is a wonderful way to give back to your country and a chance to help remake our world.

The truth is we can all learn from each other. Government doesn’t have all the answers and neither does the private sector. We must take the best approaches of each and find solutions to the problems that bedevil us today.

Wherever you’re headed, I hope you will think about how you can use your energies to help create a better America. My best wishes to all of you for continued success.