

# The Spirit of Service

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United States Ambassador to Syria, 1998-2001

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**A**fter concluding a 37 year Foreign Service career as Ambassador to Iraq from 2007 to 2009, I accepted an appointment as Dean of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. In a December 2010 convocation address, I tried to describe what brought me here. In an important way, my past with the State Department and my present and future here at A&M come down to a single word: Service.

I first came to A&M early in 2009, shortly after I returned from Iraq. I was invited to deliver a speech at the Presidential Conference Center, and three things happened during that visit that set in motion the events that brought me to A&M on a permanent basis.

The first was reconnecting with the 41<sup>st</sup> President of the United States. We met 20 years ago when he asked me to serve as Ambassador to Lebanon. The embassy had been closed for several years because of the violence there—I guess I was considered sufficiently expendable to attempt its reopening. We stayed in touch over the years—in Kuwait where he is a national hero for liberating the country 20 years ago, and in Pakistan where he joined with President Clinton to lead earthquake relief efforts in 2005-2006. When I saw the President again in 2009, he talked about the importance of Texas A&M and the Bush School in his vision of preparing new generations of dedicated public servants to ensure America’s future, and I thought again that the United States has never had a leader who so personified public service—from World War II to Congress, Envoy to China and Ambassador to the United Nations, Director of the CIA, the Vice Presidency, the Presidency, and the post-Presidency.

The second thing that happened during that visit was the time I spent with Bush School students. I did graduate work at a good school of public policy—the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton—and I have maintained a connection there. But the students here are different. Their commitment to service, their obvious determination to make their communities, states, and this nation better places, left a lasting impression on me. It’s all in the name—the George Bush School of Government and Public Service—not public administration or public policy—but service. And our graduates walk the walk—70 percent do go into public service, more than double the average of the other leading schools. And for someone who had spent a career in public service that made an impression.

Finally I made the acquaintance of A&M itself, a truly great university. One of the things I did on that first visit was to have a conversation with the Corps of Cadets. Since my first tour in Lebanon during its civil war almost 30 years ago, I found that whatever challenging part of the world I might find myself in, especially if it featured organized violence, there would be Aggies alongside, mainly from the Corps. No university outside the service academies has contributed more men and women to America's armed forces or paid a higher price for service in the nation's battles. And I saw a certain equivalency between the Corps of Cadets and the Bush School—young men and women committed to serving the country, whether in uniform or as civilians.

So a few months after my visit, when the Bush School was looking for a Dean, I put my name forward. I wasn't exactly sure what a Dean did. But what I did know was that I wanted to be associated with an individual, a school and a University where service counts. And I am extremely happy to be here today.

Our students graduating now from A&M are stepping forward at a time when there is an enormous need for a commitment to service. We are a nation at war, even though, as Secretary Gates has recently pointed out, for most Americans the wars remain an abstraction, a distant and unpleasant series of news items that does not affect them personally. Not here. Graduates are entering a troubled world in which the United States may be the dominant power but by no means the determinative one. It is a world that must be understood in its own messy, complicated terms, where local and regional realities are always ready to ambush the most sophisticated of Western strategies. But fights have to be fought, and we are fighting them today. The challenge is knowing when and how to pursue those fights, whether in military or civilian service. It is essential to know our adversaries as well as our allies. They know us. The basis for that knowledge is what graduates have acquired in their education here. It includes the study of politics, of history, of culture, and especially of language. And with that understanding, must come the readiness to ask the hard questions: What happens the day, the month, the year after an intervention, in a region and a world in which our adversaries may not even start to fight until after we think we have won the war. But when we are committed, we need to stay committed. Both our friends and our enemies have drawn dangerous conclusions over the years concerning our staying power and determination. Those same questions are on the table again today, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Pakistan.

Graduates will go forward with the spirit of service—they need to develop it, figure out where their comfort zones are, and then move beyond them. My advice is simple. Go to hard places. Do hard things. Move to the sound of the guns. Some will do so in the international arena, in uniform or in the civilian services. But there are great needs at home, and the challenges of America's inner cities and underdeveloped rural areas require as much commitment and dedication as service in Kandahar, Peshawar, or Basra. At the end of the day, whatever way our graduates choose to serve, they will come to value what they contribute far more than what they accumulate. The meaning of life is not measured in trips to the mall. Some will make great contributions in the private sector, which is the engine that America ultimately depends on for her prosperity. I hope those who do will consider paying back later on, as so many of my distinguished non-career colleagues have done.

Service to something greater than self is of course an Aggie tradition. It also helps ensure that education has real meaning, especially the important lesson that life is not, in fact, all about you. It's not as easy as it sounds, because self-centeredness is actually our natural default setting, and this gets even harder as one settles into adult routines. As the great American writer David Foster Wallace put it, many of the trends in modern American culture invite us to experience the freedom of being "lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation," where our immediate experience supports our belief that we are the absolute hub of the universe. Service takes us out of ourselves to a more important kind of freedom that involves attention, awareness, discipline and sacrifice for a larger cause. It is what makes America great.

I followed a hard service into hard places, and I am proud now to take a place here at this great university among those who will carry our nation forward. President Bush has described public service as a noble calling. It is. One of his predecessors, John Adams, put it this way: "Public business must always be done by somebody. If wise men decline it, others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not." America has great need today of the wise, the honest and the courageous.