

CONVOCATION ADDRESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER AND CORE VALUES

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
MAXWELL SCHOOL OF CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
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THE HONORABLE DAVID M. WALKER  
COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

- Dean Palmer, Professor Straussman, distinguished faculty, and graduates - thank you for inviting me to give today's convocation address.
- It's a pleasure to be able to recognize recipients of the master of public administration degree, as well as the master of arts and public administration degree, from one of the finest public administration schools in the world – The Maxwell School at Syracuse University.
- I am a frequent speaker at the Maxwell School's National Securities Studies course. In fact, I was just here in March at the very outset of "March Madness." It was then that I predicted Syracuse would win the NCAA basketball championship. I wish all my predictions were as accurate. By the way, congratulations on your national championship.
- Sean O'Keefe, your former director of National Securities Studies and the Administrator of NASA, was the first person to invite me to speak at Maxwell after I was appointed Comptroller General. By the way, he was also a candidate for my job five years ago, and we have become fellow transformation leaders and good friends.

- I congratulate all of the graduates on this significant accomplishment that, I hope, will be one of many important milestones during your careers. Thanks goes to your families whose financial and moral support probably went a long way in helping you achieve your goals.
- As only the second person in my family to graduate from college and as a parent of two college graduates, I know from first-hand experience that family support is both important and, by the way parents, never-ending. None of us should ever underestimate the importance of family.
- GAO, the agency that I head, is no stranger to the University of Syracuse or the Maxwell School. During the past 3 years, GAO has hired a total of 33 graduates from Syracuse, 25 of whom were from the Maxwell School.
- These new hires gain exposure to such areas as homeland security and justice, international trade, the financial services industry, military force structure and preparedness, social security and retirement income, health care, education, and so on.
- In fact, the scope of GAO's mission covers every area the federal government is involved in, or is thinking about getting involved in, anywhere in the world. Simply put, we try to help the Congress and the federal government work better and for the benefit of all our citizens.
- Today, one of GAO's key missions is to use foresight as a means to alert policymakers to long-term challenges facing our nation and its place in the world.

- Most countries, including the United States, are confronted by a range of trends and challenges that have no boundaries. These include challenges such as changing security threats, demographic trends, rapidly evolving science and technology, economic transitions, government transformations, and for the United States and many other industrialized nations' current and projected long-range budget deficits.
- With regard to our escalating budget deficits, our projected fiscal gap is so great that we are not going to grow our way out of the problem. Tough choices will be required, both on the revenue and spending sides of the ledger. Your generation needs to be informed and involved in connection with these challenges. The simple fact is, if your generation does not become more active, you will pay twice for the failure of others to act in a timely and responsible manner.
- From a broader perspective, given these common trends and shared challenges, no nation, not even the United States should go it alone. Stated differently, as a superpower there are many things that the United States may be able to do alone, but that doesn't mean it should do so. We have to lean on each other and learn from one another. Let's face it. No one has a claim to planet Earth. It belongs to a higher power than ourselves.
- In order to address today's many borderless challenges, we're partnering more with our fellow performance and accountability professionals and various non-partisan good government organizations both nationally and internationally.

- For example, I and my counterparts around the world, encompassing more than 180 countries, are working together to promote improved transparency and enhanced accountability in governments around the globe. We're also sharing best practices and lessons learned in a wide range of areas of interest to our clients, our countries, and our citizens.
- Recent terrorist events, the Iraq war, AIDS, and the current SARS challenge have served to fuel a worldwide heightened sense of vulnerability, prompting many to take stock of their lives and reassess their values and priorities. Ironically, this sense of vulnerability can help bring us together as a nation, as a people, and as a world.
- These events can help all of us to focus more on the word "we" rather than "me." They can also help us to understand how fragile life can be and how we should make the most of it while, hopefully, always being prepared to meet our maker.
- As someone once said, the things that matter most in this world cannot be held in the palm of your hand...love, happiness, justice, faith, family, freedom, peace...the list goes on and on.
- In the final analysis, irrespective of the challenges that governments may face, there's one thing no one can dispute: An effective government demands a quality workforce...this is true for any government, whether it be the United States or the many countries represented by today's graduates. In the final analysis, in today's knowledge-based economy, people represent the most valuable asset of any nation or organization.
- In this regard, I must confess how impressed I am with the diversity of this graduate class. I wish you could see the view from where I'm standing. You're a microcosm of the many faces in today's world, and together, you are a reminder of the peaceful co-existence we all strive to achieve.

- As human beings, we all have much more in common than separates us. We must build on what we have in common and capitalize on the strengths that diversity can bring, especially in the United States, which, in many ways, is a microcosm of the world.
- I understand that a number of the graduates have already returned to their countries, anxious to put their newly acquired education to work in their own communities...an education that could probably serve them anywhere in the world.
- As all of you enter into the next phase of your life, please remember that character counts.
- The word, “character,” brings to my mind the words of Dr. Martin Luther King: “I have a dream that my ...children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”
- It is character that defines the type of graduates we must hire in the future. It is character that defines today’s public servants around the world. And it is character that will largely define each of you, no matter what you decide to do in life.
- As many recent character failures in the public, private and non-profit sectors have demonstrated, it takes years to build a solid reputation, but it can be lost very quickly due to a real or perceived breach of trust. Just ask the former partners and employees of Arthur Andersen!

- Don't forget. The law sets the minimum standard of acceptable behavior, not the desired state. Always do your best, and always try to do what is right.
- In order to help guide your way in life, please consider adopting a set of core values...or whatever you may choose to call them. They are positive beliefs and personal boundaries that can serve as a foundation for how you will live your lives and make decisions everyday.
- These values can help you stay a true course and avoid the many changes and challenges that will confront you in life. They can also help you make decisions on complex and controversial issues much faster in today's faced-paced and ever-changing world.
- Most world-class organizations have their own set of core values. The Marine Corps' are honor, courage, and commitment; the FBI's are fidelity, bravery, and integrity; and GAO's are accountability, integrity, and reliability.
- When you come to Washington, I invite you to visit GAO. You'll see our core values over the entrance of our building. They're also on our letterhead, business cards, and on our famous "blue-cover" reports. More importantly, 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 importantly, the character of our people.

- Having a set of core values can make a difference in many dimensions of your life. They can also help to define and develop your own character. My own personal core values – leadership, integrity, and innovation – have made a difference in my life.
- As graduates of the Maxwell School, you have knowledge and skills that will be in demand, both domestically and internationally, and especially in public service. I understand that many of you may still be undecided on a career choice. Some of you are waiting for that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, while others are just waiting for a decent offer in light of the current tight job market.
- As someone who has worked in both the private and public sectors, I can attest that a career in 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 who you'll never meet. It's a calling where both individuals and groups are capable of making history and changing the future.
- 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; who seek to maximize their self worth rather than their net worth. Individuals who identify more with the word “we” than the word “me.”
- I chose to return to public service for these very reasons, and I plan to serve out my entire 15-year tenure as Comptroller General of the United States. I'm proud to say that my son, Andy, is also serving our country. Andy is a Marine Corps officer who recently returned from serving in the Iraqi Freedom Campaign.

- In closing, my GAO staff will confirm that I can't complete a commencement speech without mentioning one of my personal heroes - President Theodore Roosevelt. Today's speech is no exception.
- Theodore Roosevelt, fondly known as TR, was our youngest president and a man of character, conscience, and conviction. He was a true leader and a real Renaissance man who served as President of the United States in the early years of the last century.
- He is the only person to win both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor in combat. He was an optimist who firmly believed in the potential of both government and public servants 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 was a man of character, and he made a difference in many ways. Each of you can too.
- Remember, in today's world, individuals with a good education, solid character, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude have virtually unlimited potential.



- Your degree from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs is evidence of a good education. You have earned it. It's up to you to put it to good use and to deliver on the other key elements of success.
- And don't forget that it's people who try their best to make a difference that really count, even if at first they don't succeed. As TR said: "The credit goes to the person who is in the arena; and aggressive fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords."
- I'm confident that each of you will do your best to make a difference in today's world, no matter what your personal career or cause may be.
- In closing, congratulations again, and I wish each of you the very best in your chosen careers. May God bless you and your families.

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