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It's a special honor for me to be with ASPA members during Public Service Recognition Week. Congratulations in advance to tonight's honorees for service to the public. I expect that most of the people in the room tonight were involved this week with efforts to recognize the work you and your people and your institutions do to serve the public.

I think that's so important right now to put a face on quality public service—given the challenges we face in service delivery—but also the upcoming challenge we face in inspiring and recruiting and finally retaining the next generation of people committed to public service. That challenge is what I'd like to talk about tonight—the need to hook the next generation on public service.

What hooked you? For me, many years ago, it was both the LBJ School and ASPA that played important roles in helping me come to terms with what it really meant to commit to public service.

A quarter century ago last Fall, I started my graduate work right here at the LBJ School, hoping that the experience would help me to connect with people who wanted to make significant contributions to the public good. I can tell you that my hopes were realized. The lessons learned—from faculty and students alike—were truly life changing. And my experiences back then with ASPA members also showed me in very personal terms what a commitment to public service was really all about.

During my student years, I helped to establish a new program to finance student travel to ASPA meetings, a tradition that continues at the LBJ School in modified form to this very day. I remember so clearly my reactions at the ASPA National conferences—talking with people who were committed to making a difference in peoples' lives. I was hooked! And I've been hooked ever since. I don't know your story, but if you are here tonight your commitment is obvious.

Well, one of our biggest challenges today is to attract the next generation of young people into public service. And today thankfully, more people are open to considering government service as an option.

It's clear that since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Americans are looking to their public institutions and their public servants for help and for answers. Today, government institutions are viewed less as the problem and more as a part of the solution. This is a trend heading in the right direction.

Throughout the 1990s, overall levels of trust in government started rising and rose fairly steadily, up from an abysmal rate in the mid-20's in 1990 to the mid-40's by the end of the decade. And for the past 9 months, about 60% of Americans trust the actions of

government. And maybe that's not surprising, given public attitudes during crisis. But the question for all of us is whether this moment in time is a short-term aberration—or is it a real opportunity to bring into government service a new cadre of idealistic and skilled young people.

The good news is that surveys clearly show that young people now are more inclined to think favorably about public service. And more good news, in a very strange way, is that government will need those young workers desperately! At the federal level, within 3 years, half of the workforce will be eligible for retirement. We will lose an enormous pool of institutional knowledge. And so will most state and local governments. But this challenge is also an opportunity.

The need for a new cadre of dedicated workers is real. And the growing desire to serve is also real. But there is a very big caveat—while Americans—particularly young people, feel more positive about public service, recent events have not influenced the behavior and the choices of young people.

According to new surveys from the Council for Excellence in Government fewer young people are actually voting, volunteering, interested in running for office or seriously considering government service at any level. Actions are not matching feelings. Enlistments in the US military are not up. At the LBJ School we only saw a modest increase in applications for graduate school. I Chaired the Admissions Committee—I hoped for more applications!!

The Council for Excellence in Government survey reported that college graduates believe jobs in the private sector are better than public service when it comes to offering interesting and challenging work, rewarding outstanding performance, and allowing employees to take initiative. And those who want to contribute to society increasingly see the non-profit sector as their natural home. By a decisive margin of 52% to 10%, they say that non-profit organizations offer a better opportunity than the government when it comes to contributing to society and making a difference.

People see government employment as being buried in bureaucracy, and worry that decisions will often be based on politics rather than merit. Now, we all know that the non-profit world offers enormous opportunities for meaningful work. But, we in this room also know that government does too! We have our work cut out for us to bring this new generation of workers into government service.

Let's not kid ourselves—that's not going to be easy! According to the Council just one in six college-educated workers express significant interest in working for the federal government. And there is widespread ignorance about the opportunities available. While over half of workers say that they are well informed about private sector career opportunities, only a little over a quarter feel well informed about government opportunities.

We have other obstacles—I read a survey a couple years ago that found that most people could not name a single important success achieved by the Federal government in the past 30 years. Not improved health care for seniors, airline safety measures, student aid, environmental protection, public health, disaster relief, or welfare reform.

At the same time, our popular culture feeds the perception that government is either corrupt, inept or both. The survey found that government officials have the worst image of any occupational group—three-fourths of television episodes that depict government operations portray them as corrupt. What do we need to do?

First and foremost, we need to put a face on public service. We need to help young people realize the enormous potential for accomplishment in the public arena. And we also need to make government work better, whether it's airport security, the public schools or lost Social Security checks. There is a strong correlation between performance and public confidence in government. When we make government work, public confidence and trust in government rises.

We also need to strengthen our recruitment and retention strategies—to make the quality of the workplace better—and to make public service a real calling. We need to sell our institutions if we are to attract a new cadre of committed public servants.

I also believe we need to make public service an honorable calling for the full range of Americans, including our increasingly diverse population. As our population changes, our institutions need to change as well. We need to do all that we can to see that our institutions reflect the people that we serve. In my lifetime, our country will not only be older, it will also have no racial or ethnic majority.

The new census figures make this even clearer—in Texas today, 57% of people over age 18 are Anglos and 57% of people under age 18 are non-Anglos. In two decades the non-Anglos will increase to dramatically. The US as a whole will also see dramatic changes. No other nation in the world will go through demographic changes of this magnitude in so short a time. And Texas will be one of the states leading the way.

Well, this increasingly diverse America is our service population. Whether we are Social Security, or the State Health Department in Austin, or the Austin public school system, we need our institutions to serve our changing population. And to better serve a more diverse population, we need to become more diverse organizations—to look like America.

We need to take action not only because it is morally right—although that is certainly important—but also because it will strengthen our public institutions. President Clinton used to tell us that diversity and excellence go hand in hand. That's so true.

Our diversity has the potential to be our nation's biggest comparative advantage. And we certainly need our public institutions to take full advantage of the changes underway in America.

I have a picture in my office of President Johnson visiting Social Security headquarters in Baltimore a generation ago. He's surrounded by a dozen of SSA's top executives—every one a male—every one white—every one at least middle-aged. That picture doesn't fit today and it certainly won't fit tomorrow! We need a new generation of dedicated and diverse public servants. Over time, government must increasingly look like the America it serves.

A year and a half ago, as my term of office as Commissioner of Social Security was coming to a close, I was shown my new office at the LBJ School. It's fair to say that the new office didn't have any of the trappings of power, as did my recent offices in Washington, DC! When I was shown that little office, it was almost empty—bare of all pictures and mementos and personal memorabilia. But there was one single box over in the corner. The box contained some of the writings of a past occupant of the office—a woman who taught us all about public service. A woman whose voice—and what a voice—touched us all. Her name was Barbara Jordan. I must say, that office has seemed a lot bigger to me ever since that moment.

Among the speeches buried in that box was Barbara Jordan's Harvard University Commencement Address given in 1977—when I was a young student at the LBJ School, rushing off to ASPA Conferences and meeting people whose commitment to public service was as big as the State of Texas. That day at Harvard, Barbara Jordan said: "What the people want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise." In these particularly rough seas, I think that's an important star to steer by. Our public institutions—when they are effective—are part of that promise of America. Let's find the ways to help the next generation. Help us steer the way.

Do you remember the movie "Field of Dreams"? "If we build it, they will come." If we build a ball field—even in the middle of nowhere—they will fill the bleachers.

Today I think young people are looking for that ball field—looking for a way to serve. If we live up to our promise:

- To build public institutions that work
- To build public institutions that people want to commit to
- To build public institutions as diverse as America

If we live up to our promise, they will come to serve. And if they come, their lives—and America—will be the better for it.