

“The Challenges of a Public Service Career”

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ean Merget, faculty, staff, guests...and especially graduates. It is an honor to be here today to speak at this commencement to men and women who have chosen public service careers.

Almost a quarter century ago, I entered the MPA program at the LBJ School of Public Affairs in Austin, hoping that the experience would help me make a larger contribution. Since then, I have said dozens and dozens of times that my degree was the real turning point for me -- giving me the skills and confidence to make that larger contribution in the public arena. And right after my graduation, when Scotty Campbell -- the former Dean of both the Maxwell School and the LBJ School -- created the Presidential Management Intern program, my degree helped unlock the door to that remarkable opportunity.

I have never for a second regretted my educational choices, and neither -- I think -- will you.

Those of you in this 75th graduating class of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs -- the nation's oldest and one of the most respected schools of public affairs in the country -- are uniquely positioned for a public life in a new century.

Whether you seek careers as administrators of public programs, policy wonks, or budget analysts... whether you lean left or right...whether you will make your mark in Washington or Rochester or Korea, or the other countries represented by the flags on this podium...if you pursue your career with passion and conviction, you can make a real difference in our public life. And I frankly think the need has never been greater than today for capable and committed managers in government.

My own career has provided a vantage point from which I have seen many of the successes and failures of public policy over the past quarter-century. I have come to appreciate the

importance of our institutions and the interplay of ideas and personalities in our public life. I have also come to understand that history is largely biography, and that committed individuals -- with skills -- can shape events and institutions.

On this occasion, I want to talk with you about the personal rewards and challenges of a public service career...and also about our role in reaffirming and strengthening our government institutions.

On the personal level, I can truthfully tell you that senior government officials work very hard...love their jobs...and also understand there is very little public validation for what we do. Last year, the National Journal conducted a poll of senior officials and found that most say while they work very long hours, they are deeply gratified by the work. In fact, only one person reported being very dissatisfied with their work. I doubt any survey of corporate executives, or even university presidents, would find such unanimity of career satisfaction.

But...

It is also true that only about 30% of the people we serve -- the American public -- trust the government. They have little confidence in the motives of government officials...or in the belief that government is working in the interests of the average American.

A recent survey 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, food safety measures, student aid, environmental protection, the Hubble telescope, 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.

More Americans know the many failings of Mayor Quimby on the Simpsons than know the many real-life accomplishments of mayors such as Andy Young of Atlanta.

Of course, some may say that in a democracy a little irreverence for government is healthy. And actually, I agree with that. But if Americans become too cynical or apathetic about their government, they will continue to withdraw their trust...as well as their participation in the governing process.

How do we reach -- can we reach -- the 80% public approval of government that existed when I entered college in the mid-1960's -- pre-Vietnam, pre-Watergate.

I believe that we can...if.

If we have capable and relevant institutions...

If we involve the public in the issues of the day...

And if we attract the best and the brightest of our increasingly diverse workforce to government service.

The first of these criteria is performance -- providing quality service to the public. Walter Broadnax, the Maxwell Alumnus of the Year in 1994, who was recently appointed as the new Dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University, made this very point at this very commencement two years ago.

There IS a strong correlation between performance and public confidence in government. When we make government work, public confidence and trust in government rises. Government agencies have to strengthen activities which improve efficiency, accountability and public service.

We need institutions that are clearly focused on results, with all employees and all managers aimed at meeting goals to better serve the public.

That's part of our public trust.

I can honestly tell you that performance is a touchstone for what we do at Social Security where, frankly, we have to provide good service. When you get more than 60 million phone calls a year on your 800 telephone number, you'd better have strong performance goals understood throughout the organization and strong management systems to handle the workloads. You'd better have a workforce with the ability to answer questions quickly and accurately, and accountable managers focused on customer service and results.

When you have 44 million Americans counting on that monthly Social Security check to be there for them -- many who are living month-to-month -- you'd better make darn sure that the Y2K bug won't interrupt those payments, even by a single day.

And with 150 million Americans paying into the system, you need to develop tough but fair anti-fraud and program integrity measures to assure accountability of scarce public resources. And somehow you must find a way to do it all without breaking the bank. That's also part of our public trust.

Our goal in Social Security is to do all of this -- and more -- correctly, and to do it with the utmost courtesy and consideration for our customers. We still have our share of problems, but we work hard at managing for results.

It is for these reasons that we were very honored to be recognized this year as the top performing Federal agency by the Government Performance Project -- a project cosponsored by the Alan Campbell Institute at the Maxwell School. The most important lesson we learned is that skilled management really does matter. Managers with passion and conviction can create top-performing public organizations, and help build public trust. Indeed, the study found that people who believe that federal government agencies perform well, also trust government to do the right thing.

So clearly service is important. But I believe more public involvement is also necessary to improve public trust and confidence in government.

Former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan once observed that “The stakes are much too high for government to be a spectator sport.”

She couldn’t have been more right. And she couldn’t have been more profound.

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer recently noted that “the Constitution creates a method for making decisions; it then leaves decision-making to the democracy that it creates. For this reason, the Constitution demands participation by the public. And without trust and participation, the Constitution cannot work.”

I believe that our major public institutions need broad based legitimacy -- across generations, income groups, over time. Our institutions must be able to win and maintain public support...they must be involved in educating the public about critical issues, and encouraging their active participation in the process. But that doesn’t happen automatically. It takes hard work, by many people.

Social Security is one of these institutions. Within the next thirty years, the number of older Americans will double, placing very real strains on our retirement system.

Beginning more than a year ago, President Clinton held a series of national and bipartisan town hall meetings on the future of Social Security. And we at Social Security supported this effort by first establishing goals for educating the public about Social Security. We then developed public education materials, trained our managers to lead discussions, and held more than 5,000 public education events and media opportunities on the future of Social Security -- joined by people on all sides of the philosophical and age spectrum.

Personally, I’ve done hundreds of events. I’ve spoken in college classrooms and senior centers, in union halls and business forums. I’ve done talk radio from Hawaii to New Hampshire. I’ve appeared in congressional forums with Republicans in upstate New York and Iowa, and with Democrats in Wisconsin and Louisiana.

The common goal has been to involve Americans in discussions about our collective responsibilities to one another, and about the future of our nation’s retirement system.

Will Social Security be there in the future as a solid foundation that can be counted on in retirement?

Of course it will, and our Nation’s economic strength gives us a real opportunity to strengthen Social Security. But, again, change won’t just happen automatically. For those who are serious about governing, we have to confront challenges honestly and directly. And doing so raises tough questions. Will current retirees and members of my generation enjoy a secure retirement? How can we ensure that we don’t unfairly burden younger generations? How do we do so in ways that strengthen the fabric of our society?

And, pragmatically, how do we get from here to there? How do we make sure that we don't just "kick the can down the road" 20 years and wait for your generation to handle it? Not easy questions -- but Social Security is the sort of large public issue that demands public involvement. I don't know if we will resolve the Social Security issue this year. But I do know that we are closer to resolution because of our efforts with the American public.

What other actions can we take to raise and strengthen confidence in our public institutions? If we are to increase trust and confidence in government, we need to attract the nation's best and brightest to public service careers.

We need highly skilled professionals with a passion for their field, who also have new ideas and understand the cares and concerns of a changing population.

And 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. By the middle of the 21st century, our country will not only be older, it will also have no racial or ethnic majority. No other nation in the world will go through demographic changes of this magnitude in so short a time.

Last year, I participated in a naturalization ceremony in San Antonio. Hundreds of Asians, Africans, Hispanics, Europeans...all becoming Americans. I remember that day the faces glimmering as a 100-year-old woman from rural Mexico rose -- with assistance from her family -- to take the oath and become America's newest citizen. I was deeply moved.

It really is a wonder that people from so many different parts of the world can dream of--and then actually become--Americans.

This diverse America is our service population. Whether we are Social Security, or the State Health Department in Albany, or the Syracuse 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.

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.

Well, the picture of my agency's leadership is changing. And so is the picture of my senior managers and workforce. Over time, my agency will increasingly look like the America we serve, and we will serve America to the very best of our abilities.

So what do I think we need? Better service to the public focused on real results...better communication with the public...and better managers, with closer alignment between our institutions and changing public needs. These are the management tasks for all of us in the public arena. And they are not easy tasks.

To the graduates -- today's degree is a ticket -- to those challenges, to very hard work and, I

believe, to immense satisfaction.

Harry Truman once said, "We can never tell what is in store for us." When I received my degree almost a quarter century ago, I could not have predicted my future --or my country's future. I'm sure that the beginning of the 21st century will prove to be as uncertain as the last quarter of the past century has been. But this I know to be certain: the coming century is YOUR century.

I'm counting on your generation...we all will be counting on your generation...to provide the skills and passion and conviction to shape the future, to strengthen our institutions, and to better serve the public.

Albert Schweitzer once told a graduating class that "I don't know what your destiny will be...but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve." I believe that is so true...and I must tell you, my MPA degree was my passage to service...and immense personal and professional satisfaction.

As graduates of the Maxwell School, you have already made the choice for public life...and the unique rewards it offers. You all now have the skills needed to strengthen our institutions, and to better serve the public. If you also have the passion needed to meet the challenges you will inevitably face, you can help shape our future and help write the destiny of the next century.

So...to all of the graduates here today...I'm proud that you have chosen a life in public service. And to the guests of the graduates here today -- parents, spouses, loved ones, children -- be very proud of them. They have chosen a path to benefit you -- to benefit all of us. We all wish them success -- for all of us.