

GWU Graduate School of Political Management Commencement
July 31, 2004

Thank you, Dean Arterton and Dean Johnson. I appreciate your invitation to speak to this year's graduating class. Congratulations to our award winners – Richard Reisig and David Payne. Your hard work and commitment to service have earned you the well-deserved recognition of your peers and professors.

Parents, family, and friends of today's graduates – welcome. Your sacrifice, support and tuition payments helped make today possible. And to the graduates of the Class of 2004, congratulations.

By obtaining an advanced degree in political management you have decided to enter the world of professional politics. It's a world full of glamour and celebrity.

A world in which, depending on your party affiliation, you will soon hobnob either with the likes of Ben Affleck, Bon Jovi, and the cast of the West Wing – or with people who have seen Ben Affleck's movies, own Bon Jovi CDs, and watch the West Wing on TV.

Winston Churchill famously said, "You make a living by what you earn. You make a life by what you give."

Today, I'd like to share some thoughts with you on three things. First, the important role that public servants have played in our nation's history....Second, what I see as the central mission for our generation of public servants. And finally, some advice on how your chosen profession can help your own personal pursuit of happiness.

For more than two hundred years, through peace and war, confidence and crisis, American politics has served our nation well.

America is better today because George Washington understood that true leadership meant serving the people, not maximizing personal power.

We are better today because Thomas Jefferson expanded our boundaries and our horizons.

America is better for Abraham Lincoln's unwavering commitment to preserving the union and ending slavery.

We are a better nation because of Franklin Roosevelt's infectious optimism in the face of fear at home and danger abroad.

America is better because Martin Luther King Jr. called on our national conscience to make the Constitution mean what it said.

And America and the world are better because of Ronald Reagan's clear-eyed determination to defeat Soviet communism.

Yet public service involves more than the historic acts of heroic leaders. The ordinary acts of public service of generations of Americans have also shaped our nation and improved the world.

Consider how public service responded to the challenges, and changed the nation during your parents' generation.

America in 1945 had just defeated dangerous foes in Germany and Japan but faced new challenges. Soviet Communism was bent on world domination, starting in Europe. GIs returned from victory at war but needed to find work at home. African Americans and women were still denied the right to pursue the American Dream.

Because of farsighted public servants, our parents' generation converted these challenges into opportunities. First, we reformed our government to meet the Cold War threat by building a permanent defense and intelligence infrastructure that was up to the challenge.

The GI bill allowed millions of Americans to access universities, producing the best-educated generation in our history and unleashing trained minds to innovate and create.

The Interstate Highway bill put America on the move and gave people who had grown up in city apartments and row homes access to new houses and a piece of land they could call their own.

Welcoming immigration policies attracted the brightest and most motivated people in the world to our shores – so that the American economy and society could always be enriched by new energy and fresh blood.

Civil rights laws were passed, finally, that made sure the American constitution applied to all of our citizens. Employers were encouraged to provide health care and pensions to their employees so that an illness no longer meant devastation to our families, and after a lifetime of hard work, Americans could enjoy their golden years.

More recently, lower marginal tax rates laid the foundation for job growth and investments in technology that have revolutionized the world.

The creation of IRA's have allowed ordinary people to save for a retirement that marks a new dawn in life rather than a long twilight.

Each of these advances made real difference in your parents' lives and the nation they built. And each occurred because American politics worked for our national good.

Today, our generation faces new challenges. A twilight struggle against communism has been replaced by a generational battle with international terrorism. Our parents' struggle with

stagflation now takes the form of global economic competition. And while the law ensures equal protection for all Americans, too many are still unable to pursue their vision of the American Dream.

Like our parents' generation, our generation must take on these challenges. Government and politics do not provide all of the answers. But just as our parents reformed their laws to meet the challenges of their day, we must also change our government to address our changing world. This is one of President Bush's most important missions, and in my judgment the central mission of our generation of public servants.

Under the President's leadership and the bipartisan efforts of Congress, we have transformed our government to deal with the terrorist threat. Our Pentagon is today built to deal with asymmetric threats like Al Qaeda.

The wall between law enforcement and intelligence has been broken down by the Patriot Act. And because we have re-organized the federal government and created a Department of Homeland Security, protecting American citizens is our top priority. Based on the recommendations of the 9-11 commission and others who have studied this, President Bush will take the next step in reforming our government to respond to terror by improving our intelligence capabilities,

Global competition requires that Americans be the best trained and educated in the world. So we've reformed our education system through the No Child Left Behind Act. We're also transforming how workers are trained for a lifetime of learning.

Global competition means it's just as easy for a company to locate in India as Indiana. So we must make sure the American economy is more worker friendly with lower taxes, fewer lawsuits and less red tape.

Global competition means that Americans may have to work longer hours or sometime two jobs. So we must make sure that the American workplace is more family friendly and flexible.

And global competition means that Americans will frequently change jobs throughout their lives. So we must make sure that the health care, pensions, and training that our parents used to get through their lifelong employers are portable, and can go with workers from job to job. Employers used to provide health care and retirement security for their workers. If your employer will change often throughout your life, you need to own your own health care and training.

Finally, we must make sure that all of our fellow citizens can pursue the American Dream. Technology can close the divide between haves and have nots. If our schools are wired and our teachers inspired, a child's education can be based on their abilities, not their parents' zipcodes. And by involving churches, synagogues and mosques in the delivery of services to the poor, we will help more Americans in need.

While our generation works to reform government for the challenges of the 21st century, politics can make an immediate and tremendous difference your own lives. This path you've chosen presents fantastic opportunities for people in their 20s and 30s.

In many professions, your success depends more on how much time you put into a job than in how well you do the job. But politics moves too fast to wait for people to accumulate experience slowly.

Public service thrives on the energy and idealism of young people. Age is an afterthought. Politics is a meritocracy, in which people earn promotions and advancement, take on bigger roles and more important responsibilities, because they prove through hard work, creativity, and skill that they can handle it.

Take a look at any part of the federal government, from the halls of Congress to the agencies of the executive branch, right to the West Wing, and you'll find people your age filling important positions and playing key roles, oftentimes making decisions that will have far-reaching consequences. Your career, too, will advance by leaps and bounds. But promotion and success aren't givens. You have to earn them.

In politics, your skill and competence are easy to assess: Did you win? Was your candidate elected? Did your bill get passed? Did the media show up for your event? People will trust you with responsibilities and expect you to deliver. And when you do, you'll find that more and more opportunities present themselves.

As you enter this noble profession I'd like to share some lessons I've learned along the way. Lessons that I hope will help you rise in our profession.

First, it's important to remember that the most worthwhile struggles are often very difficult. Public service requires you to sustain motivation and passion over many months and years. Some days your energy will flag and you'll wonder whether you're having any impact at all. In an age of hour-by-hour news cycles it's often difficult to take a step back and assess the progress you've made.

But try now and then to duck your head out of the storm and take a moment to appreciate your accomplishments. Well-deserved pride and satisfaction can restore your will to stay engaged and stay committed to your goals.

Because this is a long-term game, you're going to see a lot of the same people year in and year out, but in different capacities.

So my second piece of advice: make sure you treat everyone as if one day you might work for them – because it's likely that you will. From my experiences in Congress and in campaigns around the country, to my involvement in the 2000 presidential campaign, my work at the White House, and now my current job as the President's campaign manager, I've seen a lot of the same faces – but every few years they play different roles, with greater or lesser authority attached at each step.

I may be the campaign manager right now, but some of the people I manage today will no doubt hire me in the years ahead.

Treat everybody with equal respect and importance. It's amazing what people at the top can accomplish if they know they're accountable for their decisions – and it's impressive what junior members of a staff can achieve if they're empowered.

Third, don't be afraid to trust people with responsibility. Remember, leadership is not about being the smartest person in the room. It's about earning the confidence of your colleagues and bringing out the best in others.

Campaigns work most effectively as a team. And teams work most effectively when every player can make important contributions to the effort. By giving other people the opportunity to prove their talents in critical situations you'll find key people you can depend on and you'll also generate loyalty to your vision and your leadership.

In politics, as in so much else, you can do anything you want – but you can't do everything you want. Leaders who make a difference are leaders who set priorities. The same is true for political professionals. On any given day you'll have the opportunity to meet with your candidate, talk to reporters, hire somebody new, plan an event, hash out strategy, and raise funds for your campaign or your cause. But you only have so much time, and you have to set priorities to make sure that you're using your time and your people efficiently to achieve the big goals.

How you practice is how you'll play. In politics you have to practice and work hard to be successful. You obviously can't practice Election Day before it happens. But you can spend time getting your organization in place, recruiting the volunteers, making sure people know what their responsibilities will be as the big day approaches.

You won't be able to prepare for every eventuality. As the 2000 race taught us, there will always be unexpected events. But if you take the lessons of the past seriously and identify problems early, you can make sure that you don't allow the same mistakes to happen twice.

And finally, remember that the true power of politics lies in ideas, not in tactics. Ideas bring people together and inspire them to work for a candidate or to vote for a candidate.

Ronald Reagan was twice as Governor of California and twice as President, winning each time by landslides, because of the power of his vision, not just the soundness of his tactics.

Reagan ran on a platform of a few clear ideas. The government should be less intrusive. Taxes should be lowered to spur investment and economic growth. The United States must lead the world in defeating Soviet communism.

These basic ideas, as well as Reagan's optimistic, hopeful outlook for America's future, changed America and the free world. Yes, President Reagan argued well for his positions. But he was the Great Communicator because of the greatness of what he communicated.

Some of you may already be involved in campaigns in this election year. Others may be working in government agencies or congressional offices or lobbying firms.

However you use the skills you've learned at GW and apply them to the world, remember that your actions will shape the course of our country. They will leave a lasting impression on our society. And the vast majority of the people you work with will be just as idealistic, just as devoted to great goals and good government as you are.

The cynicism you overcame when you decided to get a degree in political management may sometimes encroach on your work. Don't let it overwhelm you.

Remember the great men and women who have been attacked in the political arena but still held fast to their ideals. Thomas Jefferson was called an arch infidel. Opponents accused Abraham Lincoln of shredding the Constitution.

Harry Truman was dismissed as a failed habersasher not up to the job. And they dismissed Ronald Reagan as a warmonger and a cowboy. Each of these leaders succeeded because they held fast to their beliefs and ignored the critics.

Remember the tremendous technological and social progress we've made over the last few generations by relying on politics to settle our differences and form a consensus.

And think about the pride and honor you'll feel when a goal you've devoted yourself to achieving ends up changing people's lives for the better.

Thank you all for bringing your energy and enthusiasm to politics and public service. I'm sure our paths will cross somewhere on the campaign trail. And I hope you'll look kindly on me in the future when I ask you for a job.

Congratulations and best of luck.