â€œDoes Honor Have a Future?â€• â€“ William Bennett

Description

I found this speech when a friend gave me a small reprint of it in a booklet that he thought I had loaned to him. It wasnâ€™t me, but I told him Iâ€™d like to read it myself. Itâ€™s a good topic for the times and a well done speech. Given by William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education and now well known talk show host, it was addressed to the Midshipmen of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD, November 24th, 1997.

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It is a bit strange to me that a well-worn former government employee and sometimes philosopher like myself should be asked to address this assemblage on matters of ethics and honor, right and wrong, on the question, â€œDoes Honor Have a Future?â€• But as Sir Thomas said, â€œLadies and gentlemen, I give you these times.â€•

And what do we make of these times? These are good times and bad times. We all know that there have been troubling, and even terrible, incidents here at the United States Naval Academy and other academies as well. While we should be bothered by these incidents, we should also be bothered by the superficial, flawed analysis these events have sometimes received. Most of these bottom on the limp excuse that the academy simply reflects more general changes in society. It goes something like this: â€œThere are problems like these problems everywhere â€“ so why not here? The Academy is just a reflection of the larger society.â€• To which I would respond: No, it is not. Whether we are talking about Annapolis, West Point , or Colorado Springs, you are supposed to be different â€“ and in some important ways, you are supposed to be better. It is a wise man who said that when a man enters military life, he enters a higher form of civilization.

Former Assistant Secretary of the Army Sara Lister, who called the U.S. Marines â€œextremists,â€• did not sufficiently grasp the point. But, thank goodness, many others Americans do.

So, yes, the military is â€“ and ought to be â€“ different in some important ways from the world outside its walls. it operates with a different code of conduct, a different set of activities, a different way of life. I have no doubt that most of you â€“ perhaps all of you â€“ will leave the academy changed in many important regards. Perhaps now you can see the changes in your own life occurring even now.

Last year I visited the Air Force Academy and spoke with one of the cadets, the son of a friend. He told me about the grueling schedule: drills, training, study, sports, lack of sleep, the constant pressure to perform, officers yelling at him to do better and to be better. I asked him two questions: When you are home on vacation, do your friends understand what it is

you are going through? He told me no. I then asked him: Do you like it here? And he said: â€œMr Bennett, I love it.â€• And you could tell that he did â€“ as I know many of you love the regimen here, even as you struggle to master it. And in mastering it, it is inevitable that you will draw back from some of the softness of contemporary civilian life.

IU want to draw to your attention an extraordinary 21995 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, written by Thomas E. Ricks, about the transformation that took place in marine recruits after 11 weeks of boot camp at Parris Island.

A marine talked about his re-entry into society: It was horrible â€“ the train [ride home] was filled with smoke, people were drinking and their kids were running around aimlessly.â€• Another private said this: â€œit was crowded. Trash everywhere. People were drinking, getting into fights. No politeness whatsoever.â€• But he went on to say, â€œI didnâ€™t let it get to me. I just said, â€˜This is the way civilian life is.'â€• According to one sargent major, â€œIt is a fact that there isnâ€™t a lot of teaching in society about the importance of honor, courage, commitment. Itâ€™s difficult to go back into a society of â€˜whatâ€™s in it for me?'â€•

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You know that that is, unfortunately, pretty accurate. There are plenty of people in the rest of society, who live outside these walls, who do not identify with what you stand for; some who do not agree with it; and some who even scoff at honor codes and mission statements, feeling themselves superior to such things.

Here at Annapolis you learn obedience to orders, the responsibility of command, respect for authority. Here at Annapolis, you have dedicated yourself to high purpose and to noble cause. but in the twilight of the twentieth century, concepts like honor, nobility and manliness not only do elicit approbation, but too often illicit ridicule, scorn and mockery.

It brings to mind C.S. Lweisâ€™s book, *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis writes: We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.â€•

America is the greatest nation in the history of the world â€“ the richest, most powerful, most envied, most consequential. And yet America is the same nation that leads the industrialized world in rates of murder, violent crime, juvenile violent crime, imprisonment, divorce, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, single-parent households, teen suicide; cocaine consumption, per-capita consumption of all drugs, and pornography production and consumption.

America is a place of heroes, honor, achievement, and respect. But it is as well a place where far too often, heroism is confused with celebrity, honor with fame, true achievement with popularity, individual respect with political correctness. From inside here you look out at a culture that celebrates self-gratification, the crossing of all moral boundaries, and now even the breaking of all social taboos. And on top of it all, too often the sound you hear is whining â€“ the whining of America, what can be heard only as the enormous ingratitude of modern man toward our unprecedented prosperity and good fortune.

Despite our wonders and greatness, we are a society that has experienced so much social regression, so much decadence, in so short a peirod of time, that in many parts of America we have become the kind of place to which civilized nations used to send missionaries.

Of course this does not change your duty in general, or your duty to this country in particular.It doesnâ€™t mean you may not defend the nation, or be willing to give your life for it. Because the ideals of this nation are still the greatest ever struck off by the mind of man. And because we are a free society â€“ with all its attendant virtures and vice â€“ we expect you to defend the whole nation. Your job, as you know â€“ like it or not â€“ is to defend the worst, as well as the best of us.

So there is a difference, isnâ€™t there, between life here and life outside? but let me be very candid and ask a question. There is doubt in Boulder, Birmingham, Boston and Buffalo. Is there also doubt about honor here in Annapolis? Are the midshipmen of the United States Naval Academy, and your colleagues, ever seized by mission doubt? Does doubt about honor gain any purchase here? are you sure, in your bones and in your heart, as well as in your head, why honor is worthy of your allegiance?

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I ask because I am told that among even the militaryâ€™s best and the brightest young men and women there is confusion of purpose, attenuation of belief. What is it all about? What matters most? What is life for? What endures? These are the kind of questions young people within and outside the military have always asked. They are worthy of your attention, and ours. And they deserve, from your teachers and others, an answer.

Let me briefly try to begin to answer these questions by using two contemporary reference points which celebrated major anniversaries in the summer of 1994. The first was the twenty fifth year reunion of Woodstock. Woodstock, you may recall, was a rock festival held in New York in 1969. It was attended by 300,000 young people in the first 24 hours, and it was marked with rowdiness, drinking, drug use and even death.

The other 1994 reference point was the fiftieth anniversary of Operation Overlord, the Normandy invasion under the command of General Dwight David Eisenhower. This was, as you know, the largest amphibious landing in history. It was attended by about 170,000 young people in the first 24 hours. Let me say a few words about each.

Back in the summer of â€™69, Woodstock was the â€œdefining event of the generation;â€• It was undoubtedly the high point of the counterculture movement in America. â€œIf it feels good, do itâ€• was the kind of unofficial banner under which the participants walked. But it is worth noting, I think, that most of those who attended the twenty fifth year reunion were not even at the original Woodstock rock festival. The reason, one can fairly surmise, is that for many of those who attended in August 1969, the memories were not good ones, not ones they wished to rekindle. Woodstock was not a place to which they wanted to go again. Many people grew up and grew beyond what Woodstock stood for; in adulthood, they consider it to have been childish, Utopian, irrelevant, irresponsible, or worse. It was a chapter of their lives many would just as soon close, a memory they hoped would grow dim with the passage of time. And the deaths and sickness there were pointless, mindless, and aviodable. It was a season of drug overdoses and self-inflicted death.

Now compare the Woodstock reunion with the anniversary of D-Day, which took place on another coast, in the same year. What they were celebrating was something far different. Poignancy and dignity surrounded that event, precisely because the stakes involved were so high, the heroism so manifest, the examples so inspiring. Many listened to President Roosevelt's prayer, broadcast on D-Day, as he recognized the horror that awaited the young men who had embarked on the "Great Crusade."

"Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor…They will need Thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces…They will be sore and tired, by night and by day…The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violence of war."

As at Woodstock, there were deaths there. But they were different, in numbers and in cause. According to reports, in one ten minute period on Omaha Beach, a single rifle company of 205 men lost 197, including every officer and sargent. These were not pointless, avoidable deaths. The price was very high – but for which they died was sacred. We remember. And so those who could, came back.

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My point is a simple one: Ephemeral things are the flies of summer. They drift away with the breeze of time. They are as wind and ashes. An event like Woodstock cannot hold the affections of the hear, or command respect, or win allegiance, or make men proud, or make their parents proud. It may be remembered by the media, but it leaves no lasting impression on the souls of men. It is forgotten. It is meant to be forgotten. People do not pilgrimage there, for it can give them nothing of worth.

Plato reminds us that what is real is what endures. Trenton, Midway, and Tarawa; those on the Bonhomme Richard and the crews of "Taffy Three" in Leyte Gulf; the marines and brave naval offices at "Frozen Chosin" – these things endure.

In the *Funeral Oration*, Pericles said, "For it is only the love of honor that never grows old; and honor it is, not gain as some would have it, that rejoices the heart of age and helplessness."

Honor never grows old, and honor rejoices the heart of age. It does so because honor is, finally, about defending those noble and worthy things that deserve to be defended, even if it comes at a high cost. In our time, that may mean social disapproval, public scorn, hardship, persecution, or as always, even death itself. The questions remain: What is worth dying for? What is worth living for?

So let me end where I began. Does honor have a future. Like all things human, it is always open to question. As free citizens, we can always fail to live up to these "better angels of our nature." A lady reportedly asked Benjamin Franklin after the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention: "What kind of government have you given us, Dr. Franklin?" The good doctor replied: "A Republic, if you can keep it."

> And so honor has a future â€“ if we can keep it, and you can keep it. We keep it only if we continue to esteem it, to uphold it, value those who display it â€“ and refuse to laugh at it.
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> I have suggested a gulf â€“ sometimes even a chasm â€“ between your life here and the rest of America. But there are bridges made by hands and words and ideas that reach across generations, across the centuries, from military to civilian, from civilian to military. I am thinking of small groups of men, not soldiers, not naval officers. They were civilians â€“ only civilians. But it was not by accident or luck that our founders pledged to one another â€œour lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.â€• They meant it. In this act of national baptism, we are all bound together.
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> It is your task, members of the brigade â€“ it has been given to you, especially â€“ to show the way as you and your fore bearers, alive and dead, have showed the way before. We outside know you will do it again. And children will learn by your example what honor means.

Thereâ€™s a lot of stuff to chew on in that speech, and, given the state of the affairs at the Naval Academy, I would think this would have been appropriate to deliver again. For the leadership, from ADM Rempt down to the most junior middie. The entire Lamar Owens case points out there is a loosening rip on honor, when an accuser admits to numerous violations, yet is allowed to remain in the Brigade. even worse, the top of the chain of command has to be reprimanded by an O-5 JAG about actions that were prejudicial to the case.

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In case youâ€™re not locking in on those comments, link over to CDR Salamander and The Countervailing Force to do some catch up reading. Itâ€™s ugly, and base, and itâ€™s at the USNA.

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Date Created
August 3, 2006
Author
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