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REMARKS DELIVERED BY CLAUDE S. BRINEGAR, SECRETARY OF
TRANSPORTATION, AT THE GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE U.S.
COAST GUARD ACADEMY, NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT, JUNE 6, 1973

It's a great personal honor to be invited to be the commencement speaker at your graduation. One of the real plusses in being Secretary of Transportation--at times, in fact, it seems like the only one--is the opportunity that it gives me to be closely associated with the people and the accomplishments of the United States Coast Guard. Today's events have further strengthened that conviction.

Lacking a career in the Coast Guard, it's clearly inappropriate for me to speak to you of its splendid past and its hope for the future. Admiral Bender and others have, I'm certain, adequately covered these subjects. And since my public-service days are far fewer than yours, it's likewise inappropriate for me to remind you of the virtues and rewards of serving your country. You're well ahead of me in that area.

But we do have some common bonds. Twenty years ago this summer I too was an about-to-be-launched college graduate. Well educated, inexperienced, hopeful-- I suspect

these words fairly describe both my situation then and yours today.

Looking back over these 20 years, what words of guidance can a newly-minted Secretary find that are worth offering to 194 about-to-be-minted Ensigns? After a bit of reflecting I have settled on four major points that I think are worth passing along.

First, I can say that quite clearly a first-class education, such as you have received here, provides an excellent career starting point. But the specifics of that education grow less and less important as you move deeper into the realities of the real world. The important thing is to hang on to the "general principles" of the subjects. And then, as you develop new skills and encounter new experiences, try to distill these events down to their general principles, building from one to another.

Second, as soon as possible--hopefully before the end of college and certainly not long afterwards--you should get clearly fixed in your mind your sense of identity--your sense of who you are as an individual. Closely related, also reach agreement with yourself about your personal code of behavior. The outside world can be a cold and lonely place. Until you

have really focused on these issues--until you can say to yourself "I understand myself--my strengths as well as my weaknesses," and "I know where I stand on the fundamental issues of truth, integrity, and ethical behavior"--until you have really imprinted these things into your head, you run a serious risk of rudderless drifting and possibly unnecessary entanglements. Ask yourself how you stand on these questions--and remember the answers!

Here's a list of some of the points that, in retrospect, have been useful to me as I have sorted out my own answers to these questions:

1. Establishing your identity and personal code of behavior is a solitary business. Don't mimic others just to be on the bandwagon. Think it out yourself. "I gotta be me" is a lyric that hits the mark well.
2. All learning processes require a certain amount of trial and error. The virtues of truth, integrity, and ethics--which are so obvious in general terms--are not always so obvious in specific situations.

3. Keep your eye on the larger objectives, especially in times of crises. Don't let trivia divert you.
4. Keep your lines of communication open, especially to those above you. Each has, in varying ways, encountered some of the issues and uncertainties you will come up against. I've often been pleasantly surprised to find how much I can learn by simply and directly asking a few intelligent questions.
5. Don't lose track of the basic necessity to observe good manners in your dealings with your fellow human beings. The Coast Guard is increasingly moving into new assignments (for example, in pollution control and in small boat safety) that require, in addition to firmness and fairness, a good measure of manners. One of Congress' most distinguished committee chairmen has a fine way of putting it: "We can disagree," he often tells me, "but let's not be disagreeable."

Third, career advancement, whether in government service or in business, comes at different rates for different people. It also brings different degrees of satisfaction. Some people seem driven to strive for the top, while others feel more comfortable at some point below it. While it's hard to generalize about the keys to success--or, in fact, even to define "success"--I believe that my experiences have provided some useful insights about the qualities of those who advance rapidly. Here are three of the most important of these qualities:

Heading the list is the "will to succeed" at whatever the person undertakes. While it's hard to define "will," it's clearly a distinguishable characteristic between the successful and the rest.

Second on the list is the person's ability to understand, to function within, and, if needed, to work to improve the system within which he and his organization operates. The "system" may be the enemy to some, but to others it's a vital element to success.

Third on my list is the possession of a fair number of these essentially personal behavioral characteristics: A sense of high self-esteem; a willingness to be accountable

for your actions, whether good or bad; a feeling of optimism about the future; a sense of awareness; a creative approach to life; the ability to communicate to an exceptional degree, including the willingness to understand others' points of view--some might call it empathy; and the ability to respond to pressure with peak performance. Certainly, no mortal is likely to have all these qualities, but the higher the percentage the higher the chances of outstanding performance. It's fair to ask: Can these qualities be taught, either by teachers or by personal actions? I'm not sure, but I do believe that if they are present even to a modest extent, they can be sharpened and brought into focus by personal discipline.

Fourth and finally, I would like to offer this comment: Don't take life so seriously that you somehow miss the joy and wonder of it. The world can be a serious place, but sprinkled throughout it there can and should be humor and good spirits. Enjoy these moments. Enjoyment can also come in other ways--by acquiring new knowledge, from having close friends, from sharing a job well done with your associates, and from pride in your organization. These and other enrichments should be sought and savored.

Finally, I would say: Your willingness to serve your country and the exceptional qualities you are bringing to the Coast Guard's corps of officers--these are the things that bring honor and hope and even pride to all of us who have the pleasure of knowing you and being associated with you.

It's my personal honor to say to you, the Class of 1973 of the Nation's oldest sea service--the one service that's as important in peacetime as in war--Good Luck and Smooth Sailing.

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