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Presentation by  
the Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States

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# The Privilege of Public Service

Roger W. Jones Award for Executive Leadership Ceremony  
American University School of Public Affairs  
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Thank you, Bob Tobias, for that kind introduction.

I'm pleased and honored to be here this evening. I'm a big believer in public service, so speaking at an event like this that recognizes outstanding public servants means a lot to me. First, I'd like to congratulate our two awardees tonight: Dave Altwegg, of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), and Bill Gimson, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In your roles as the defacto Chief Operating Officer (COO) or Chief Management Official (CMO) for your respective agency, both of you have shown how things can and should be done to make a difference in government. It's a great testament to Bill and Dave that their CEOs, Julie Geberding and Lieutenant General Obering, are here tonight.

I'd also like to acknowledge the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) strong ties to the Roger W. Jones Award for Executive Leadership. Chuck Bowsher, my predecessor as Comptroller General, chairs the selection committee, and Jacquie Williams-Bridgers, who's in charge of GAO's international affairs and trade area, also serve on the committee. In years past, Elmer Staats, who was Comptroller General back before Chuck and me, is also an emeritus member of the committee.

I have great admiration for all of them. By helping government run more economically, effectively, ethically, and equitably, Elmer, Chuck, Jacquie, and many other GAO employees have made—and continue to make—a real difference on behalf of the American people.

The namesake of this award, Roger Jones, also had a distinguished career in government, one that spanned many decades and a number of major departments and agencies. In particular, Roger Jones was known as a champion of education for federal managers and executives, and he received a number of high honors for his efforts to improve the quality of public administration.

During my tenure as the head of three federal agencies, I've found that outstanding public servants share certain traits: great vision, solid values, and a deep commitment to the mission of their agency. They understand that working for the greater good is life's highest calling. Over my career, I've worked many years in both the public and the private sectors, and I've always considered public service not a job but a privilege and an opportunity to make our country and our world a better place.

Today, we need more public officials who feel that way. We need more men and women who are willing to speak the truth, face the facts, do the right thing, and make changes and choices necessary to help create a better tomorrow. We need more men and women who can help our country and its citizens prepare for the challenges of the 21st century and capitalize on emerging opportunities. We need more men and women who have the courage to put the needs of the next generation ahead of the next election cycle. Because, at the end of the day, we should all be able to look our children and grandchildren in the eye and say we did everything we could to pass on an America that's both better off and better positioned for the future.

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With the retirement of the baby boomers and rising health care costs, we're facing a fiscal challenge unprecedented in American history. At the same time, our world is experiencing dramatic changes on several fronts, from the economy to the environment to public health and national security.

Unfortunately, our elected officials have not done enough to prepare us for this reality. This is particularly true with our nation's finances and our government's continuing lack of fiscal discipline. But so far, there's been little meaningful change in direction or shared sacrifice. Candidly, we've heard a lot of rhetoric but seen too few results when it comes to our fiscal imbalance and other major challenges.

There are, however, exceptions to this lack of results in connection with transforming government. We are honoring two of those exceptions tonight, Bill and Dave, along with their chief executive officers (CEOs), are making changes at CDC and MDA.

Tonight, I'm going to talk more about why it's so urgent that we transform government. I'll also examine the key role that ethics and integrity need to play in public administration and why public service and public servants are so important to our country's future.

## **Transforming Government**

To keep pace with the challenges that are coming, our government must also change. Government transformation is essential. In my view, the first order of business is to restore fiscal discipline. Washington needs to face facts and improve transparency over where we are financially and where we're headed fiscally.

To help restore fiscal discipline, among other things, we need to impose meaningful budget controls on both the tax and the spending sides of the ledger. Members of Congress should also have more explicit information on the long-term costs of spending and tax bills—before they vote on them. With its \$8 trillion price tag, the Medicare prescription drug benefit is a glaring example of what's wrong with the current system.

More broadly, too much of government today remains on autopilot and is based on social, economic, national security, and other conditions that existed when Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy were in the White House.

As a nation, we need to ask some basic questions about what government does and how it does business. How should government be organized? Should contractors or federal employees carry out its missions? How much will it cost, and how will we pay for it?

Nothing less than a top-to-bottom review of federal activities is needed to determine whether agencies are meeting their objectives. Congress and the President should decide which policies

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and programs remain priorities, which should be overhauled, and which have simply outlived their usefulness.

To give you one example in the tax area: Just this summer, the U.S. government announced it will stop collecting a 3 percent tax on long-distance telephone calls. This doesn't seem particularly startling until you realize the tax had been introduced in 1898 to help pay for the Spanish-American War—a conflict that last only a few months!

In particular, entitlement reform is essential. We need to restructure Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid and make these programs solvent and sustainable for future generations.

To help in this effort, GAO has published a groundbreaking report that asks a series of probing, sometimes provocative, questions about both mandatory and discretionary spending and tax policy.

GAO's report is called "21st Century Challenges: Reexamining the Base of the Federal Government," and you can find it free on our Web site at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov). In my view, this is must reading for anyone who's interested in public policy and our nation's future. My hope is that policymakers and the public will begin to think more strategically about the future and how we can get back on a more prudent path.

While key policymakers have a lot of work to do, so do career civil servants, especially members of the Senior Executive Service (SES). Political appointees come and go, and the vast majority of them never have to eat what they cook up, whether it's good or bad. On the other hand, career SES members have the institutional knowledge and the perspective to help lead this much-needed and long overdue transformation effort.

We need capable career executives to help lead this fight because the stakes are very high. It's time to reconsider our approach to political appointments. We also need to recognize the differences among policy, operational, and adjudicatory type executive level positions. At major entities like the Defense Department or the Department of Homeland Security, we also need to hire COOs and CMOs with proven track records. These positions should be term appointments that focus full-time on business transformation issues that are both important and nonpartisan in nature.

## **Ethics and Integrity in Government**

The simple but powerful truth is that effective government requires a first-rate workforce, which brings me back to our event here tonight. To tackle current and emerging problems, government needs men and women who are able to think strategically, creatively, and decisively. I know that at GAO and many other federal agencies, we're recruiting individuals with very impressive credentials, individuals who have knowledge and skills that were unknown a generation ago. But character also counts. Federal employees need to have a well-developed sense of right and

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wrong. You want people in public service with energy, ability, enthusiasm, strong ethical standards, and empathy for others. You also want people who are more concerned about the public good than personal gain.

When I came to GAO in 1998, one of the first things I did was to introduce a set of three core values that define the nature of our work, convey the character of our people, and describe the quality of our products. Our three core values are accountability, integrity, and reliability. They're intended to supplement the requirements of the law and various professional standards that apply to us. You can see these core values over the entrance to GAO's headquarters here in Washington. More important, they are in the heads and hearts of our people, and they guide how we do business every day.

We have recent examples in the private sector that show what happens when individuals and institutions lack or stray from a set of core values. At Enron, Worldcom, and other companies, the unethical behavior of some top executives, auditors, and other professionals led to bankruptcies and restatements that have harmed countless shareholders, employees, and retirees. People lost their investments, their jobs, and their pensions. Public confidence took a big hit, and it's going to take years to rebuild that trust.

### **Public Service: An Opportunity to Make a Difference**

I know many of you here tonight are recent or future graduates of American University's highly regarded School of Public Affairs. I hope you'll seriously consider public service as a way to make a difference—for your country, community, church, family, and fellow citizens.

As someone who has divided his career between government and the private sector, I can tell you that my experience at federal agencies has been challenging, enlightening, and rewarding. In my 33 years of public and private sector experience, I've found the federal workers I've had the privilege to lead have been as good as or better than employees in the private sector. These public servants have generally been far more committed to mission. My public sector experiences gave me a chance to contribute and to help real people, people like the students on this campus, retirees like your grandparents, and veterans who have fought to defend this country. You have the opportunity to do the same.

As I said earlier, public service is a privilege. It's a chance to make peoples' lives better and their futures brighter. Public service is a calling where individuals and organizations can help build a better future for our nation and our world.

One person can make a difference. My favorite modern President, Theodore Roosevelt, is proof of that. TR, as he's often called, was someone with character, conscience, and conviction. As our 26th and youngest president, he was an optimist who firmly believed in the potential of government to improve the lives of all its citizens. As a trustbuster, TR took on some of the nation's most powerful and ethically challenged corporate interests. And he won. As an

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environmentalist, TR left us a legacy of great national parks like Yosemite. As an internationalist, TR promoted the building of the Panama Canal and led peace talks to end the Russo-Japanese War. TR is also the only American to have won both the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Theodore Roosevelt, Chuck Bowshers, and Roger Joneses of this world can be tough acts to follow. But the truth is that while it matters who's in the CEO slot, meaningful and lasting change tends to come from the combined efforts of many individuals, at both levels, both inside and outside your organization. Today, all of us have to be part of the solution. It's no accident that the Constitution begins with the words, "We the people." We need to be sure that these words come alive if we want to maintain a healthy democracy.

In closing, the two people we're honoring this evening represent qualities that are essential to the future of the civil service. Government transformation isn't going to happen without people like David Altwegg and William Gimson. I often say that people are government's most important asset, and people will determine whether our government keeps pace with changing times and delivers real results that meet the needs of the modern age. To succeed, we're going to need more elected, appointed, and career government leaders with courage, integrity, creativity, and a commitment to stewardship.

If we work together, I'm convinced that, over time, we will succeed in better positioning our government and our nation for the future. As TR said, "Fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords." Please join me in this effort to fight the good fight for our country, our children, and our grandchildren. Let's work together to make sure that our best years are ahead of us rather than in the past.

Thank you.

