

## **The Public Servant: An American Idol For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States  
Lincoln Memorial University Commencement  
Harrogate, Tennessee  
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- Thank you for that kind introduction. I would like to thank Chairman DeBusk and the Board of Trustees, President Moody, the faculty, and the graduates for inviting me to give today's commencement address and for awarding me an honorary doctorate degree.
- Graduates, I appreciate the opportunity to share this very special day with you, your families, and friends.
- I congratulate you on this significant accomplishment. I hope and expect that it will be but one of many important milestones in your careers.
- I realize that today is about your accomplishment, and so I'll try to keep my remarks fairly brief but meaningful. I say "meaningful" instead of "memorable" because I don't expect you to remember them 30 years from now. Candidly, I don't remember who my college commencement speaker was.
- However, one person who none of us will ever forget is this university's namesake, Abraham Lincoln. He is not only one of our most recognizable presidents, but also one of the most quoted people who ever lived. He spoke words that everyone can understand on topics that touch us all: life, liberty, freedom, faith, truth, and justice. He had a natural gift for oratory, exceeded only by his high moral standards and his strong belief in God. Some would say Lincoln was the model public servant. Yet, despite all of his talents, Lincoln was a modest man.
- President Lincoln is one of my "American idols" – a fitting description that many of you can identify with these days. His life, his words, and his deeds have inspired me since I was a child growing up in Alabama, and they have continued to influence me throughout my career in public service, most notably as Comptroller General of the United States.

- Abraham Lincoln was known for many things. He fought for liberty for all and to preserve the Union in the face of unprecedented internal strife. He was also known for his courage, persistence, and perseverance in his quest to serve the public interest, even in the face of long odds and significant opposition. For example, over the years, he lost many political races, including two for the Senate, before finally being elected as President.
- Arguably, Lincoln's most memorable words were the ones spoken at Gettysburg. The Gettysburg address is timeless and especially poignant in times of war.
- Since we are currently engaged in a global war against terrorism, it is especially important that we not forget those who sacrificed their lives, limbs, and livelihoods to promote and defend the cause of freedom. On a personal note, my wife Mary and I are very thankful that our son Andy, who is a captain in the Marine Corps, returned from Iraq last year both healthy and whole.
- Like Abe Lincoln, I and millions of other Americans are public servants, and we are especially committed to serving the public interest.
- As you weigh your future options, I hope you will consider public service as a way to make a difference in the lives of others. I'd encourage each and every one to give at least two years of your life to public service. More than ever, we need people who grasp the seriousness of the challenges facing our nation and want to be part of the solution.
- Whether you choose to serve in the military or work in your community, for a government agency, a local charity, or an academic institution, the point of public service is to give back and to help make our great nation even greater.
- Public service is a high calling that is grounded more in personal values than market values. It involves looking out for the collective best interest of all, rather than a narrow interest of a few.

- As a result, it attracts people who want to maximize their self worth rather than their net worth, people who think more in terms of “we” than “me.” You’re hearing this from someone who returned to public service in mid career for these very reasons.
- The simple but powerful truth is that government needs top talent at all levels to help tackle the serious problems that currently face our nation and those that loom on the horizon. It needs people who are creative and forward-looking, people who can think beyond current realities to see future possibilities.
- This need will become even stronger given the large number of federal workers who are expected to retire in the coming years. As a result, the opportunities to make a real and lasting difference for your country and your fellow citizens have never been greater.
- At GAO, we speak truth to power, promote transparency, and help to ensure the federal government’s accountability to the American people. Sometimes those in power don’t want to hear the truth, but it’s important for our country and its citizens, especially your generation, that the truth not only be heard, but heeded. Furthermore, as Comptroller General, I’ve found that virtually everyone is for accountability until they are the ones being held accountable.
- One of the biggest truth, transparency and accountability challenges that we face is our nation’s current budget deficit and growing fiscal imbalance. Due largely to known demographic trends and rising health care costs, we face a large and growing structural deficit in the United States. Washington’s recent difficulty in maintaining fiscal restraint hasn’t helped matters either.
- Recently, I have been speaking out publicly about our government’s worsening financial condition and fiscal outlook. My comments are designed to simply speak the truth and promote action to help assure that policymakers will quit unduly mortgaging your future as well as the future of my children and grandchildren.

- The truth is, if government decision-makers don't begin making the necessary tough choices soon, your generation will face huge tax burdens and have little choice in what role you feel government should play in the future. In the vernacular of Jack Nicholson's latest hit movie - "Something's Gotta Give."
- Ultimately, it will take the efforts of many parties over a considerable period of time to effectively address this large and growing challenge. It will also take leaders with the courage and character to make the tough choices that will be required. I hope you will add your voice and views to this effort.
- LMU prides itself, not just in its namesake, but also in the quality and character of its graduates.
- In today's world, character counts. Your character will be tested in life. In the final analysis, your character can best be judged by what you do in a challenging situation when no one else is looking but God.
- Lately, the question of ethics and character has gotten a lot of play in the press. The recent wave of financial scandals in American businesses and elsewhere has taken a severe toll on public confidence.
- Through countless news reports, we have all become familiar with the names of various errant key players at companies like Enron, WorldCom, and yes, even Arthur Andersen.
- It's easy to forget that an institutional or individual reputation built over many years can be lost in seconds. And once you've lost your good name, it's very hard to get it back.
- As you move forward, understand that life is full of difficult decisions, and the right choice isn't always the easy choice or the popular choice. But in the final analysis, you have to do what you think is right.
- Remember that the law represents the floor of acceptable behavior...not the desired state. Let me re-state that. The law represents the floor of acceptable behavior...not the desired state.

- Things like morality and ethics are important components of a higher calling and doing what is right.
- In pursuing your careers I would encourage you to reach for the sky and seize the opportunity to make a difference and build a name for yourself. After all, in America, people with a good education, solid character, and strong work ethic and sound values have virtually unlimited potential.
- How can you make a difference? The motto of the philosopher Socrates was, “Know thyself.” Nearly 2,500 hundred years later, this motto is still pretty good advice. No matter what path you choose—government, private industry, or the nonprofit sector—do your best to make a real and lasting difference. As Abraham Lincoln said, “Nothing in this world is impossible to a willing heart.”
- Your degree from LMU is a solid start to your career. However, from this point on, it’s all up to you...that’s the good part, and it’s also the scary part.
- As you enter into the next phase of your life, please consider adopting a set of core values...or whatever you may choose to call them. They are positive beliefs and personal boundaries that can serve as a foundation for how you will live your lives and make decisions everyday.
- Most world-class organizations have their own set of core values. The Marine Corps’ are honor, courage, and commitment; the FBI’s, fidelity, bravery, and integrity; and GAO’s are accountability, integrity, and reliability.
- These values can help you stay a true course and avoid the many challenges that will confront you in life. They can also help you make decisions on complex and controversial issues much faster in today’s faced-paced and ever-changing world.
- Understand your own values, motivations, interests, and abilities. What causes inspire you? Which people do you admire? What

motivates you to do your best? The answers to these questions are the key to unlocking your future.

- In going about your jobs and daily lives, remember to heed a higher calling and to lead by example. Deliver on your promises, and don't be afraid to say what you mean, and mean what you say. In the end, have the courage of your convictions and do what you think is right, even if it may not be popular.
- My personal staff in Washington will tell you that I can not conclude a commencement speech without quoting President Theodore Roosevelt, another one of my American idols and a proven public servant in his own right. TR said, "Aggressive fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords." Pick your cause, and follow TR's advice.
- Finally, I noticed, as many of you may have, that the next item on the program is a choral arrangement entitled, "The Last Words of David." I hope it isn't reflective of my commencement address. In any event, don't forget the score: David – 1, Goliath – 0.
- Thank you, and may God bless you, your families, and the United States of America.