

Congratulations graduates of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs. You have the enviable distinction of graduating from (1) the nation’s highest ranked public affairs program at a public institution, (2) a school with a number-one rating in environmental policy and management, and (3) Indiana University’s highest ranked graduate school. Who’s going to argue with *U.S. News & World Report*? Not even the GAO will dispute these facts!

I also extend congratulations to Dr. Astrid Merget on her recent appointment as the third dean of SPEA during its 29-year history.

Dean Merget and I have a few things in common. We’re both relatively new to our appointed positions, we both share a keen interest in public service, and we’re both big fans of Teddy Roosevelt, or T.R., as he was known by many. As you may know, T.R. was an internationalist, environmentalist, and trustbuster. He is the only person who has won both the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Nobel Peace Prize—a real feat. T.R. was a real Renaissance man in his time.

In the late 1870s during a committee meeting of Roosevelt’s fraternity, T.R. told his fraternity brothers: “I am going to try to help the cause of better government . . . but I don’t know exactly how.”

I hope some, if not most, of you feel a similar passion for public service. Our federal government is an important and impressive institution. It’s the largest, most diverse, most complex, and the most important entity on earth.

How can you help the cause of a better America? How can you, one person, make a difference? Cynics are fond of saying one person can’t make a difference, but they’re wrong! Let me tell you a brief story about one public servant, an employee of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), who proved the cynics wrong.

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In 1957, before most of you were even born, a new drug appeared on the market in West Germany. Prescribed as a sedative, the drug soon became popular among pregnant women as a remedy for morning sickness. The pill was cheap and thought to be safe. Tests in laboratory animals had been uneventful. The new drug was called thalidomide.

However, doctors soon began to see a sharp rise in the number of babies born with severe deformities, including stunted arms and legs.

In 1960, a drug company applied to market thalidomide in the United States. Many expected the drug to win easy approval by the FDA. FDA assigned the thalidomide application to a new medical reviewer, a woman by the name of Frances Kelsey. Dr. Kelsey was skeptical of the drug company’s claims about the safety of its product. When the company couldn’t answer her questions about how thalidomide actually worked in the human body, Dr. Kelsey stuck to her guns and refused to approve the drug. During the 1950s and ’60s, more than 10,000 thalidomide babies were born in 46 countries. But Dr. Kelsey’s vigilance spared our country a tragedy. Countless American babies would grow up healthy and whole because of the efforts of a single woman. She made a difference then, and believe it or not, even though she is 86 years of age, she continues her life’s work at the FDA today.

We at GAO are making a difference as well. We perform audits, investigations, program evaluations, policy analyses, and a range of legal services for the Congress and the American people. GAO is in the legislative branch of government. We work with Congress to improve the performance and assure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people. Simply stated, we try to help government work better for all Americans.

As T.R. once said, “I acted for the common well-being of all our people.” That’s what we at GAO and others in public service try to do as well. We look out for what is in the collective best interest of all rather than the narrow interest of the few—the so-called “greater good.” This duty of loyalty to the greater good is one thing that can never be privatized.

Our job is to point out the shortcomings in government programs and policies, and our scope involves every area the federal government is involved in, anywhere in the world.

Yes, this is a full-time job and there is no risk of our role becoming obsolete. However, if we’re going to increase the public’s respect for and

confidence in government, we can't just focus on what is wrong with government; we also have to acknowledge what the government does well, like defending our nation, promoting free trade, and getting the Social Security checks out on time.

We also have to help government improve. The U.S. government comprises about one-fifth of the domestic economy. In terms of military, political, and economic might, we qualify as the world's only remaining superpower. The complexity and diversity of government functions today are mind-boggling.

In addition, while government does some things well, it faces a range of emerging challenges. For example: 39 million seniors and disabled persons rely on their Social Security checks to help assure they have a decent standard of living. The Social Security Administration (SSA) has won a number of customer service awards, has always gotten the checks out on time, and is generally a well-run agency. However, both the Social Security and Medicare programs face serious long-range financing challenges. In addition, SSA, like many other federal agencies, faces a range of human capital challenges that it needs to address.

The recently enacted welfare reform legislation, referred to as TANF, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, has resulted in an approximate 50% decrease in nationwide welfare cases and has helped many individuals move from welfare to work. However, we now face the challenge of dealing with the chronically unemployed in a softening economy.

Mainly through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the government spends around \$22 billion a year on biomedical research. More than 80 Nobel prizes have been awarded to research sponsored by NIH. At the same time, we need to better coordinate, target, and evaluate the billions of dollars that are spent in research and assistance each year by the federal government.

The Postal Service delivers the mail and helps to link our country together. However, the Postal Service is facing escalating losses and a range of structural challenges that must be addressed for it to successfully meet its mission in the years ahead.

And last but certainly not least, our military defends our country and protects America's interests abroad. Our armed forces deserve an "A" on effectiveness. They're the best in the world at fighting and winning armed conflicts. At the same time, DOD is a D+ on economy, efficiency, and related

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accountability matters. DOD needs to transform the way it does business to free up funds for readiness, an enhanced quality of life for our troops, and needed technological advancements.

In the 21st century, our government will face countless challenges—some that are long-standing and others that are just emerging. Government needs top talent to help meet these challenges, especially given the significant percentage of the federal workforce that will be retiring within the next few years.

In looking ahead, GAO has identified several key trends in the years ahead that will shape our society and define America’s role in the world. Among these trends are: increased globalization, changing demographics, different security threats in a post–Cold War world, rapidly evolving technologies, rising health care costs, and a variety of quality of life issues, including education, the environment, and work-family issues. We are also seeing an increase in the devolution of government functions and outsourcing of government services.

Yes, our nation is in a time of transition. We have a new administration, a new Congress, a new millennium, a new knowledge-based economy, and a temporary reprieve from budget deficits. However, based on GAO’s long-range budget simulation model, known demographic trends, and rising health care costs are likely to return us to the days of deficits in the years ahead. We have a window of opportunity for government to reassess what it does and how it does business in the 21st century.

Your generation has a lot at stake to be sure that government does engage in this fundamental re-examination. The stakes for this and coming generations couldn’t be higher.

As individuals, you must be informed and involved to make a difference. Ignorance and apathy are not viable options. My concern is that if your generation does not become more involved in the key challenges facing our country, you may pay twice for failing to act! Namely, you’ll face higher tax burdens and reduced government assistance in the future after the “baby-boom generation” retires.

The simple but powerful truth is that effective government demands a quality workforce. Government needs to attract some of today’s best and brightest graduates to tackle the problems our nation faces today and those that are on the horizon. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

You are graduating from one of the top public policy schools in America. You're in demand, and we know it. As you weigh your options, both now and in future years, I hope you'll keep a few thoughts in mind.

Ultimately, the choice of public service is one grounded in personal values rather than market values. It involves people who are focused on maximizing their self-worth rather than their net worth. And it usually involves people who focus on the word "we" more than the word "me." Opting for public service is an honorable endeavor. Public service offers an opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who you know best, as well as those who you'll never have a chance to meet. It's a calling, where individuals and teams are capable of changing the future.

During the technology boom of the 1990s, much was made of salaries and stock options, Internet startups, and initial public offerings. But the true measure of a person is not what he or she makes in dollar terms but the difference that he or she makes in the lives of others. This is why, 40 years later, people still talk of Dr. Frances Kelsey and her fateful decision.

In the United States of America, individuals with a good education, solid character, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude have unlimited potential. By graduating from this prestigious program, you have achieved the first criteria; the rest is up to you. In my opinion, every American should make a meaningful contribution to his or her country and society over a lifetime. This can be done in a variety of ways both in and outside of government service.

How can you help the cause of a better America and a better world? Public service offers you one possible answer. Yes, there are other options to government service, including certain private and not-for-profit sector positions. However, there is a difference. As T.R. would have said, in government you are "in the arena" and in the other areas, you may not be.

Irrespective of which course you take, do your best to make a real and lasting difference. And remember, as T.R. said, "aggressive fighting for right is the noblest sport the world affords."

Thank you for your attention. May God bless all of you, and may God bless the United States of America.

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David M. Walker became the seventh Comptroller General of the United States and began his 15-year term when he took his oath of office on November 9, 1998. As Comptroller General, Mr. Walker is the nation's chief accountability officer and the head of the General Accounting Office (GAO), a legislative branch agency founded in 1921. The GAO helps the Congress maximize the performance and assure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people.

Immediately prior to his appointment as Comptroller General, Mr. Walker was a partner and global managing director of Arthur Andersen LLP's human capital services practice and a member of the board of Arthur Andersen Financial Advisors, a registered investment advisor. He also served as a Public Trustee for Social Security and Medicare from 1990 to 1995 while he was a partner with Arthur Andersen. Prior to joining Arthur Andersen, Mr. Walker was Assistant Secretary of Labor for Pension and Welfare Benefit Programs and Acting Executive Director for the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. His earlier technical, professional, and business experience was gained with Price Waterhouse, Coopers & Lybrand, and Source Services Corporation.

Mr. Walker is a certified public accountant. He has a BS in accounting from Jacksonville University and a Senior Management in Government (SMG) Certificate in Public Policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.