

Unity, Dedication, and Commitment

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Thank you for that kind introduction. There is no one more surprised than I am to be standing in this spot. I've heard many wonderful addresses from this podium, and I'm both thrilled and humbled to be here.

I'm also very humbled to be speaking on this special day for our country. Not only is it the day we at BYU set aside to honor the men and women who have sacrificed for our great nation but it is also the day we exercise our opportunity to choose our leaders. In this case the ballot won't have one name with only yes or no options. You will have the choice of selecting the candidate who best represents your beliefs and your point of view. We're here today with the freedoms and the challenges we enjoy in this wonderful country because our forefathers had the vision of making us citizens instead of subjects.

As I contemplated what to speak about today, I came to the conclusion that because most of you will probably never have the opportunity to be close to the military, this time together might be best spent in a discussion about what I learned during my years of service. I'd like to focus on some of the small events that shaped my life and made me the person I am. There are three underlying pillars—three bedrocks, if you will—that are present in everything I will discuss. They are unity, dedication, and commitment.

I want you to think about these words as I speak.

I'd like to begin by reviewing some things that we as Latter-day Saints know about our country.

We know from the scriptures that this vision of freedom that is America was not an accident. In 3 Nephi we read:

For it is wisdom in the Father that they should be established in this land, and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father, that these things might come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed, that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled.
[3 Nephi 21:4]

That's definitely a higher destiny than to simply become a rich and powerful nation. We're not like any of the great empires that have preceded us—at least if you believe this ancient prophet. That is why in his dedicatory prayer at the Kirtland Temple Joseph Smith said, "May those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the

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Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever” (D&C 109:54).

In the past year or so since 9/11 we’ve had to come to grips with new challenges to our great republic. Terrorism is now a reality understood by every grade-school student in this country. Traditional measures of strength just don’t work as antidotes to this awful illness. Even less clear threats like the anthrax scare and the sniper in the Washington, D.C., area, for example, have further challenged our sense of internal security in this country. Most comforting to me in these times of trouble is how each of these events has produced heroes—individuals who rise to the occasion with remarkable acts of heroism and selflessness. In my mind’s eye I can just see Todd Beamer on Flight 93 as he spoke with Lisa Jefferson, the GTE supervisor and the only one he could reach by mobile phone. He said the Lord’s prayer with her and then offered something like, “Well, are you ready? Then let’s roll.” Todd Beamer and the other heroes of Flight 93 all gave their lives because they thought they could save other American lives or perhaps an American icon such as the White House or Capitol. As an American I appreciate those acts of heroism as well as the heroism displayed by dedicated Americans in every war we have fought.

Years ago, air force general Stu Barstad—the air force’s chief of chaplains—recalled walking through the thousands of graves at Normandy, the last resting place of so many good and dedicated young Americans who were World War II casualties. All of them had entered that war with their own hopes and dreams and families. Now their bodies were buried in this hallowed spot. As he contemplated what would have become of the lives of these young men and women if they had survived, an aged French woman walked up to him and said, “Bravo, Americans. Bravo.” She had lived through the invasion of Europe, and she understood what these young men and women had done for her country and her generation.

Such stories bring to my mind the words on a monument dedicated to our marines at Guadalcanal. Many of the young men who fought in this World War II battle were killed. “When you go home,” the monument reads, “tell them, and say, ‘For their tomorrows, we gave our today.’”

This sense of service and sacrifice—which our citizens have displayed so often in our history—is a key, I believe, to the greatness of this wonderful country. In Provo and in hometowns across America, there are men and women from our past wars and military experiences who were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country and their comrades. Many of their fellow sailors, soldiers, and airmen did, indeed, make that sacrifice and now rest in graves—marked and unmarked—throughout the world.

I have to confess that I never directly faced a situation in my air force career in which I felt that I was in mortal danger. But, like most military men and women, I’ve been personally touched by the great heroism and selfless sacrifice of many others in uniform. I feel wonderfully blessed to be a part of this great university, but I will never regret the 29 years I spent in the uniform of my country.

You should know that one event that took place during my air force career dwarfs all others in terms of importance: my introduction to and baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You see, my wonderful companion, Lana, and I are missionary success stories. We were, in the vernacular, “traced out” by the missionaries in Charlotte, North Carolina, 29 years ago. In those days the Church was certainly present in North Carolina, but it was not yet a presence. (On one early visit of our very faithful missionaries, our toddler son—now a returned missionary himself—ran to us exclaiming, “Dad, the Norman Elmers are here!”) Ours was the classic story: We listened because another young man, a student in the graduate program I was attending at the

University of Oklahoma, had been a good example. We never spoke of his religion, but his belief in and dedication to his religion spoke more loudly in his actions than his words ever could have. By the time we had completed our short course, I had several good ideas about what this Mormon religion was. I remember thinking, as we graduated from this program, that it would be nice to have as much conviction to something as this young man had to his church.

Within a month or so after I left Oklahoma, the first missionaries I had ever seen in our area knocked at our door. Our response was classic, too: “We have our own church, but we’ve seen a little about your religion, and we’re curious about some things. But you should know that we are certainly not interested in joining.”

Six months later—thanks to at least three sets of wonderful missionaries who stuck with us and a ward that understood the value of friendship—we were baptized. That day has colored and framed all the other events in my life. I will be eternally grateful to that young man in Oklahoma and to the missionaries and members who worked so diligently to give us our chance to accept the marvelous message of the restored gospel.

When we joined the Church, I had been in the air force for about four years. It was a difficult time for our country. We were just coming out of the Vietnam War, one of the most unpopular wars in our history. Americans who had fought valiantly under America’s flag came home to jeers instead of cheers and to scorn instead of honor. College students across the country, except perhaps at BYU, burned the flag and protested American involvement in this conflict. The country was deeply divided over a myriad issues, from civil rights to drugs to dropping out.

History always gives us a better perspective, and we now have a much better perspective of that period, too. As bad as it was, it was a very important period in our country, a period that had a profound effect on both society and our

government. It was an era that changed how we view ourselves and how we run our military. It was an era when we, perhaps not always in a productive way, addressed some of the most pressing social problems in our history.

I cannot overestimate the impact of this period on the air force and the military in general. Fifteen years later, when I was a student at the National War College in Washington, D.C., we were still recounting the mistakes of this period—mistakes in how we fought the war and the effects that losing public support had on both us and on our war effort—and discussing how we could ensure that this would never happen again.

It was a healthy introspective, and it produced such great leaders as Colin Powell—quiet-spoken charismatic leaders with a love of their country and an understanding of the high costs of war for us and for the enemy. This period also produced individuals like our own retired four-star air force general, Robert C. Oaks, who is now a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy. Elder Oaks, then General Oaks, led our U.S. Air Force in Europe during the sensitive years after the downfall of the Soviet Union and the breaking up of the Warsaw Pact. He was a leader in the Partners for Peace program, designed to help the countries of the former Warsaw Pact build closer ties with the United States and the West.

Most of us have an image of military leaders as cold, calculating men and women ready to fight at any provocation, aching to use their military skills and abilities. I found exactly the opposite in the military. First, as aide-de-camp and then as executive officer or personal assistant to two four-star generals—and later as a senior staff member in both the Tactical Air Command and the the Air Combat Command—I found individuals who, like Moroni, “did not delight in bloodshed” (Alma 48:11). Because they had experienced it firsthand, they felt that even one death was too many and strongly supported reasoned, negotiated solutions to international

problems over military intervention. Most of these individuals were also people of faith who, in their own way, celebrated the blessings emanating from their Creator. When it came time to fight, they were—and will be—there. But I can tell you from firsthand experience that it is a mistake to see these leaders as lovers of war. They know the price that will be paid by their comrades and perhaps by themselves as well.

My first big break in the air force came as a fluke, but it taught me a very important lesson. As a young captain, I had just been assigned to the staff of a one-star general, and by default I became the project manager for a much-despised engineering study of his command of about 3,000 people. We were a diverse command spread throughout the United States in units of 25 to 150 people. My job was to develop a plan to reduce the command by about 20 percent in both people and budget. This general was almost as new as I was, and when I went to give him and his senior staff an oral version of my final report, he stared straight into my eyes and said, “This is not the information I’m getting from my staff. They tell me we’re way understaffed. How do you know you’re right?”

I thought for a minute as I looked into the faces of the key staff members in the room. “Well, sir,” I said, stammering a little, “we’ve done the analysis and we’ve analyzed the data and we’ve done some pretty extensive modeling. I believe our conclusions are correct.” This general dismissed me and didn’t call again for some time, but I kept my job and we implemented the team’s recommendations. As a result of that experience, I ended up working directly or indirectly for this individual for eight of the next ten years as he rose from a one-star to a four-star general and I rose from captain to colonel. He told me later that our relationship—and his faith in me—was built on my honesty in that meeting. I don’t expect any special credit for being honest. In truth, I was scared to death as I faced all those colonels and generals and had to, in essence, contradict them. It is somewhat amusing how

over time my honesty in that meeting became enmeshed with the fact that I was a Mormon. People are watching us, and they expect us to live by the standards of the gospel. They expect us to be honest, committed, and dedicated.

Perhaps the greatest personal leadership challenge I faced in the air force was my second assignment as a squadron commander. I got that job, too, because I was a Mormon. The general called me in and said he needed someone to go to a recruiting unit that had deep integrity and morale problems. The commander of the unit had been released, and the squadron was in great disarray. This was a large squadron of approximately 200 people with activities spread out over a geographical region that roughly coincided with one of our Church missions at the time. And that’s how I got the idea to set this unit up like a mission. I appointed flight supervisors—or zone leaders—and I set up district meetings and reporting rules. We talked about supporting each other and having respect for each other instead of the traditional competition among ourselves. We wanted to be successful, but not as individuals. Instead we slowly turned into a team, and in two years that team became one of the top squadrons in the air force, winning an air force Outstanding Unit Award. It proved to me that the same principles we teach in our church work in our secular lives as well. Unity, commitment, and dedication are as necessary in the workplace as they are in the Church.

In my second year as commander of this unit, the nurse who led our medical professions recruiting team came in to see me. “I’d like to invite you to something,” she said. “I’d like to invite you to my baptism.” I was both thrilled and disappointed in myself. This woman had worked with me on a regular basis for at least a year and a half, and she had watched how I and other Mormons on the staff conducted our lives. She had the same feelings I had had when I joined the Church. She wanted to experience the great peace and joy the gospel brings. But in that year and a half I had never once asked

her about her interest in the Church, and I was completely shocked to learn that she, on her own, had sought out the missionaries and had gone through the missionary discussions. I had often almost said something to her about the Church, but, because of my own insecurities, I had never spoken up. Brothers and sisters, I can testify to you that our friends and colleagues want what we have. They want the contentment and hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings into their lives. As our Heavenly Father's soldiers, we must be valiant in sharing this message.

The most difficult period of my career was probably the Persian Gulf War, also known as Desert Shield or Desert Storm. For many of you it is probably the only war you remember. At the time I was director of personnel programs for the Tactical Air Command. Twenty-five thousand of our people were sent to that war, and another 25,000 were sent from other air force commands. In all, approximately 500,000 Americans and our allies were deployed to southwest Asia during this conflict.

There is no doubt that this was a traumatic experience for those individuals directly involved, but it may have been even more traumatic for the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and spouses and children left behind. Support for that war sprang from every corner. Lee Greenwood of "Proud to Be an American" fame showed up at a speech I was giving to the spouses and families of our airmen in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He came just to say thank you for their sacrifice and the sacrifices of their loved ones who were actually serving in the Persian Gulf. The airmen of Myrtle Beach maintained the A-10 Warthogs, heavily armored subsonic jets called "the tank killers." These airmen were led in the war by then Colonel (and later Major General) Dave Sawyer, a dedicated member of the Church who conducted sacrament services on his post in Saudi Arabia every Sunday he was there. General Sawyer is now deceased, but he was a marvelous

example of a great warrior and a wonderful human being and priesthood holder.

You may remember the yellow ribbons that sprouted from nearly every mailbox and tree during this war. From Florida to Maine and from Virginia to California—and I'm sure in Alaska and Hawaii, too—there were ribbons. Many of them had personal, handwritten messages next to them. Others just hung as symbols of love and support from automobile antennas and even around water tanks.

As there are from any war, there are as many stories from the Gulf War as there are men and women who fought there. An army helicopter mechanic, for example, wrote to his family back home: "As I was washing the dust from my hands, I looked at my wedding ring and thought of what it meant to me. It's as if our love buffs a shine into it that nothing can dull or tarnish. Not even when my hands are dirty with grease."

And a major on the Kuwaiti front said these words to his family back in the Midwest: "When I get back to the States, I will never take anything for granted—from a glass of milk to walking the dog. Being here doing the job in this country makes me proud to be an American soldier and grateful for what kind of society we have."

The events of that war, despite the fact that they occurred more than a decade ago, are still vivid in my mind. On the first night after Iraq invaded Kuwait, members of our stake and ward leadership visited families whose fathers would deploy within 24 hours to Saudi Arabia. The First Fighter Wing at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, was the first U.S. military unit to deploy. Langley was also the headquarters of the Tactical Air Command, in which I was serving as director of personnel programs. The first home we visited was the home of a lieutenant colonel, a fine member of our ward and an F-15 pilot who flew numerous combat missions during the war. He was a man respected by both peers and subordinates. There was anticipation and concern in that family that night, and I'm sure a few

tears were shed. But there was also a deep faith in our Savior and in our Heavenly Father's eternal plan. I had to visit other homes, too, where spouses—just as loved by their families—were leaving without that comforting knowledge of God's plan that we enjoy as Latter-day Saints. Even though in most cases those men and women returned after a prolonged absence, there was a finality and a despair about those meetings in non-member homes that saddened my heart. How wonderful it would be if all of God's children had the blessing of knowing His plan for them. How comforting these truths can be in our times of greatest need and challenge.

During that war I heard many military officers say they would rather have Mormons under their command than anyone else. "With their strong belief in their religion," they'd say, "they're not afraid to do what is necessary. They know their God will protect them." I often thought of the words of Alma as he described Moroni in the Book of Mormon:

And Moroni was a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery;

Yea, a man whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God, for the many privileges and blessings which he bestowed upon his people; a man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people.

Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood. [Alma 48:11–13]

Moroni was a man who took joy in liberty. His heart swelled with great thanksgiving to his God. Such a man firm in the faith of Christ is the model for every Latter-day Saint soldier, sailor, and airman. In fact, the world would be a much better place if he were a model for every

nation's soldiers, sailors, and airmen. He was a man who was committed to his people, who was dedicated to his God, and who unified good and noble causes.

I'd like to speak just a few minutes to those of you who may not be United States citizens. Although you may appreciate America, you also have great feeling for your own country and your special heritage. Do not take my words today as glorying in the fact and reality of war but instead as glorying in the heroism and sacrifices of the wonderful men and women who have been willing to give all they have—including their lives, if necessary—for their country. The beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are all brothers and sisters. The emphasis in every one of our lives ought to be celebrating our similarities and not going to war over our differences. I despise and renounce evil in any form, including evil perpetrated among nations. I love my brothers and sisters of every race, color, and creed. I appreciate all for their uniqueness, no matter what their ethnicity or skin color. As a Latter-day Saint I can never justify racial or ethnic discrimination in any form. Every man should be treated like my brother, and if he is my enemy, I need to work even harder to find ways to reach him and soften his heart.

We learn from the scriptures that it is not wrong to defend our families or homeland, or even our religion, but it is wrong to let hatred destroy the light of Christ in our lives. I believe this is the point Elder Russell M. Nelson addressed in his October conference talk:

*As a church, we must "renounce war and proclaim peace" [D&C 98:16]. As individuals, we should "follow after the things which make for peace" [Romans 14:19]. ["Blessed Are the Peacemakers," *Ensign*, November 2002, 41]*

We should be personal peacemakers. We should live by the Golden Rule."

This love of our fellowman should not be limited to our international friends but should be extended to all in our country as well. Our church is growing in every quarter. One of the most spiritual sacrament meetings I have ever attended took place several months ago in a predominantly African-American branch in Detroit, Michigan. There a young missionary from Florida—the first member of his family to join the Church, an African American himself—bore a testimony that shook the very foundations of that marvelous little chapel that had been created as an oasis in the middle of an old warehouse. This young man overcame great personal adversity to find the Church and to prepare for a mission. Even though he had been a member for only about four years, his testimony carried enormous power of personal knowledge and conviction.

He would not have been an obvious candidate for membership in the Church. By age 18 he was in prison with, as he said in his remarks, “his life going nowhere.” He knew this was not what he wanted for his future, and, for the first time in his life, he knelt down “with serious intent” to pray. He said he remembered having the distinct impression of inspiration, if you will, that he would be led to the true church. He began reading the Bible and other religious works while he was in prison. Once he was released, he set out to find this true church. Whom should he meet soon after he was released but two marvelous young missionaries who taught him the gospel. Now he is a returned missionary, having had a profound effect on many other lives. Isn’t it wonderful how the Lord works?

During our university conference, President Bateman told us that greater numbers of students like this wonderful missionary will be coming to BYU in the future. They come with burning testimonies but with limited knowledge of our culture and our own unique ways. Every one of us should make that extra effort to give all brothers and sisters a truly genuine, loving welcome to our wonderful university. We should

be sensitive to ethnic and cultural backgrounds and help others in any way we can to adjust to life here at BYU. Our hearts are in the right place. I believe that. But we need to reach out and be more inclusive if we are to become truly united.

I’ve covered a lot of ground this morning. I’ve talked a bit about the debt we owe our veterans and even our accidental heroes, like the brave souls on Flight 93. And I’ve tried to give you some insight into my career in the air force. My point is, ultimately, that we can never separate what we do in life and what we accomplish from the people we are. I have spoken about unity, dedication, and commitment. These principles are like the threads of a fine tapestry interwoven in all aspects of our lives—in our professions, in our religion, and in our homes. These are pervasive qualities, adding light and power to all of our endeavors.

I would like to make one last point. There is a tendency today to think about the negative and to believe that our best days as a nation and as a world have passed. I believe, as Latter-day Saints, we must look at the future with optimism and hope. There will be dark days in all our lives, and we will have challenges—some of which may, at the time, seem to be insurmountable. But through our faith and obedience the light will come. And there will be joy in the morning.

Carl Sandburg has said:

I see America, not in the setting sun of a black night of despair ahead of us, I see America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God. I see great days ahead, great days possible to men and women of will and vision. [Carl Sandburg, interview with Frederick Van Ryn in “Carl Sandburg Speaking: ‘I See Great Days Ahead,’” *This Week Magazine*, 4 January 1953, 16]

That is a great statement by Mr. Sandburg, and I hesitate to make any changes to it. But I would like to take the liberty of adding *faith* to his words: Great days truly are possible to men and women of will and vision and faith.

Brothers and sisters, I pray for each and every one of you that the Lord will bless you and your families as you enter “the crimson light of [your] rising sun.” May you have

success in all aspects of your life and may you find happiness and joy in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I say these things in His name, amen.