

Congressman Elijah E. Cummings

Naval Academy Messmen & Steward Memorial Marker Dedication and Dinner

United States Naval Academy King Hall

September 17, 2008

[2000 Words / 15 Minutes @ 140 WPM]

1 Thank you, **Vice Admiral Fowler**, for your kind
2 introduction. Your service, leadership, and dedication to
3 this fine institution of higher learning and military service
4 are a testament to the valor and resilience of the United
5 States Navy.

6
7 Although our Majority Whip, **Congressman James E.
8 Clyburn**, could not be here today, I would be remiss in
9 not thanking him for his hard work and dedication.

10
11 It was Congressman Clyburn's work with the Academy
12 and his staff that made possible this memorial honoring
13 those who have served as Messmen and Stewards.

14 Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to join you in thanking
15 those who have worked so hard to prepare and serve us
16 the excellent meal that we have enjoyed this evening.

17
18 Once again, they have done the Academy proud.

19 <Lead Applause>

20 ****

21
22 My friends, I am honored to serve on the Academy's
23 Board of Visitors.

24
25 I am honored because of your demonstrated commitment
26 to service, excellence and ideals that make our country a
27 great nation.

28
29 As Americans, we have been given a legacy that remains
30 the envy of much of the world.

31
32 I speak not of the mountains, fields, and communities that
33 we love.

34
35 These, too, are a gift beyond price.

36 However, the legacy that we honor this evening is even
37 more important, even dearer to us all.

38

39 I speak of the freedom and values that are the foundation
40 for all that is good about our nation.

41

42 And I speak of the honor we rightly call service.

43

44 As Americans, we understand this lesson of our history.

45

46 Honor and nobility are not attained – indeed, cannot be
47 attained – by the accident of birth.

48

49 As Americans, we understand that nobility and honor are
50 gained only through service to others – service that is
51 freely given.

52

53 This vision of service, I believe, is the force that brought
54 each of you here to the United States Naval Academy.

55

56 This vision – your vision of America’s values – is the
57 same vision of creating a better America in our own time,
58 which first called me to serve in the United States
59 Congress.

60
61 And, in this spirit, I greet each of you this evening.

62 ****

63
64 I firmly believe that our steps are ordered in this life.

65
66 We did not come together this evening entirely by
67 accident.

68
69 We now live in a time when far too many people – both
70 throughout the world and here in our own country – have
71 begun to doubt whether the ideals and values that have
72 made this nation great still prevail.

73
74 Our mission this evening is to declare that the American
75 journey has not ended – but has in fact only just begun.

76

77 Each new generation of Americans receives a legacy born
78 in the struggles and sacrifices of those who built and
79 protected this great country before us.

80

81 And each generation repays that legacy by making its
82 own contributions to our American ideals.

83

84 For each of you, as for me, the acceptance and
85 performance of this duty is the essential element of
86 character that distinguishes us as a free people.

87

88 We do not claim the perfection of our society – either in
89 the past or the present.

90

91 What we do claim, for ourselves and for the generations
92 of Americans yet unborn, is our unwavering dedication to
93 the pursuit of that ideal of perfection.

94

95 Both as individuals and as a nation, we learn and grow by
96 acknowledging the shortcomings of our past – and by
97 declaring:

98 We can – and shall – do better than we have done in the
99 past.

100 ****

101

102 Friends, this, I submit, is why we are gathered here this
103 evening.

104

105 In our America, there is honor only in service – and that
106 honor is shared by all who contribute to the greater good.

107

108 It is a simple idea.

109

110 Yet, this is the idea upon which our great nation was
111 founded.

112

113 And, I firmly believe, it is the same idea that will take us
114 through whatever difficulties we may face in the days and
115 years ahead.

116

117 Just as we honored those who served our dinner this
118 evening, we are here to honor those who have performed

119 that vital service to our countrymen and women in the
120 past.

121

122 Napoleon once observed that, “a military marches on its
123 stomach.”

124

125 This evening, with America’s Navy deployed throughout
126 the world, this logistical maxim remains an unavoidable
127 reality that every commander must face and overcome.

128

129 That is why, as a practical matter, the importance of the
130 duties performed by our Navy Messmen and Stewards
131 Branch cannot be overstated.

132

133 Yet, there are other, equally important reasons that it is
134 proper and just for us to honor those who have served the
135 Navy and our great country in this capacity.

136

137 They, too, risked their lives for our nation and ideals.

138

139 They, too often, joined their shipmates in making the
140 ultimate sacrifice.

141

142 Yet, to return to our vision of the nobility of shared
143 service – and the honor that should be duly accorded to
144 those who serve – we elevate our own understanding by
145 speaking the truth.

146

147 And the truth is that the Messmen and Stewards we
148 acknowledge this evening were not always treated fairly.

149

150

151

152 Tonight, we seek to move a little closer to the perfection
153 of our American ideals by acknowledging this truth.

154

155 Within our Navy – our American Navy – the positions of
156 messman and steward (created in 1893) were often the
157 only positions available to minorities of African
158 American and Filipino descent prior to President
159 Truman's issuance of Executive Order 9981,
160 desegregating the military in 1948.

161

162 African Americans have served at sea throughout our
163 nation's history.

164
165 Yet, prior to World War II, no black officers were
166 commissioned by the Naval Academy.

167
168 The most any African-American could expect upon
169 enlistment early in WWII was service as cooks or
170 officers' servants.

171
172 To its credit, the Navy officially began accepting African
173 Americans for general service in June 1942.

174
175 However, Jim Crow continued to follow black sailors to
176 sea.

177
178 Their shipmates all too often made it a priority to enforce
179 *de facto* discrimination.

180
181 Sadly, Navy recruiters even went so far as erroneously
182 informing African Americans that their enlistment would
183 be limited to the Stewards Branch.

184
185 Despite these hurdles, however, African Americans
186 proudly wore the Messmen and Stewards' uniforms.

187

188 They served in harm's way.

189

190 And, far too many now lie at the bottom of the sea with
191 their countrymen of every faith, culture, and race.

192

193 We remember their heroism and sacrifice this evening.

194

195 We acknowledge the honor they attained.

196

197 And, we applaud them for pushing the ideals of universal
198 merit and service forward in their time.

199

200 Ultimately, the legacy of American values prevailed
201 through their sacrifices.

202

203 And, this evening, when we look around this hall, we see
204 young Americans of every faith, culture and race **united**
205 in a shared legacy of honor and sacrifice.

206

207 So it is just and right that we acknowledge these brave
208 and dedicated Americans.

209

210 Today, both our Navy and this Academy have come a
211 long way toward achieving the American ideal that all
212 who are prepared to serve deserve honor.

213

214 All who serve, whatever rank they may attain, are in the
215 first ranks of America's heroes.

216

217 Today, we understand that America's defense and our
218 shared American future depend upon us – upon our
219 moving ever closer to those American ideals that I
220 mentioned.

221

222 Today, 47 percent of the enlisted ranks within the Navy
223 are ethnic minorities – and nearly 18 percent of the Naval
224 officer corps is comprised of minorities.

225

226 We are pursuing the American ideal by encouraging these
227 trends.

228

229 In this difficult and dangerous world – a world in which
230 conflict and the threat of conflict are likely to persist for

231 some time – we must transform and diversify our forces
232 in order to meet an ever-evolving spectrum of threats.

233

234 Today, naval officers and enlisted men are on our front
235 lines – positions where they face an expanding variety of
236 potential dangers – while remaining able and ready to
237 defend our nation against aggression.

238

239 I stress this obvious truth because increasing the diversity
240 of our Navy is not simply a matter of remaining true to
241 our American ideals as important as that objective is.

242

243 Today, recruiting and training the best and brightest of
244 our society into national service is critical to naval
245 readiness and to the achievement of our national security
246 objectives.

247

248 That is why I traveled here to Annapolis this evening to
249 applaud Vice Admiral Fowler and our Navy leadership
250 for their work in assuring that our Navy will have the best
251 talent that America can offer.

252 The Academy's Class of 2012 is set to become the most
253 diverse graduating class in history – with over 320 racial
254 minorities in its ranks.

255
256 This number is up from 291 for the class of 2011.

257
258 The minority enrollment here at the Academy has seen a
259 steady and consistent increase – and currently is at 22.7
260 percent.

261
262 And, I am very pleased to note that our Naval Academy
263 has the highest percentage – at 21 percent – of female
264 students of all our service academies.

265
266 This trend bodes well for our future.

267
268 Consider these facts:

269
270 According to the 2008 Census report, minorities (who
271 now compose roughly one-third of the U.S. population)
272 are expected to become the majority in 2042.

273 By 2023 minorities will comprise more than half of all
274 children.

275
276 As the minority share of the U.S. population climbs, a
277 corresponding rise is likely to emerge within our military
278 ranks.

279
280 This development must be managed with care.

281
282 Even as we honor those who have served in the past,
283 America's watchword must always remain: "We can and
284 must do better."

285
286 While the military branches within the Department of
287 Defense have begun their own efforts to increase diversity
288 among leadership, more needs to be done.

289
290 In 2007, of the 908 general officers in the Armed Forces,
291 minorities accounted for only 8.5 percent.

292
293 In comparison, enlisted minorities account for 36 percent,

294 demonstrating a severe disparity in the balanced
295 representation necessary to ensure and enhance the
296 retention of minorities.

297

298 Unfortunately, as pointed out in a recent Congressional
299 report, the Department of Defense still has unfulfilled
300 challenges in retaining and promoting minorities and
301 women to leadership positions.

302

303 In light of the 60th anniversary of the integration of our
304 Armed Forces, celebrated on July 26th 2008, I repeat we
305 can and must do better.

306

307 Thankfully, this year, the House Armed Services
308 Committee guided the Department of Defense in the right
309 direction when we passed the **Military Officer
310 Leadership Diversity Commission Amendment** within
311 the **2009 National Defense Authorization Act**.

312

313 This amendment, which I co-authored with
314 Representatives Meek from Florida and Johnson from

315 Georgia, establishes a commission that is staffed both by
316 the civilian and active duty communities.

317

318 This commission will take on the critical task of
319 performing a comprehensive examination of policies that
320 govern opportunities for advancement of minority and
321 female members within the Navy, Marines, Army, Air
322 Force and Coast Guard.

323

324 I should also note that, as Chairman of the Coast Guard
325 and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee, I am
326 committed to expanding diversity throughout the Coast
327 Guard as well.

328

329 Of the 2008 graduating class of 206 cadets at the Coast
330 Guard Academy, 29 of the graduates were minorities.

331

332 *NOTE TO EEC: The 2008 Coast Guard Academy class had 7 African*
333 *Americans, 9 Hispanics, and 13 Asian/Pacific Islanders.*

334

335 I am continually working with the Coast Guard's
336 leadership to improve the recruitment and retention of

337 diverse service members, and just last week I held a
338 hearing on this subject.

339

340

341

342 Ladies and Gentlemen, we must continue to take the steps
343 necessary to expand and strengthen our readiness – in our
344 Navy and every other branch of the Service.

345

346 And an important component of achieving that objective
347 is expanding diversity efforts within the Department of
348 Defense.

349

350 This evening, as we honor the Messman and Stewards
351 who served and achieved honor through their sacrifices,
352 we also remember that their struggles have continued
353 relevance today.

354

355 When I look around this hall, I see young Americans who
356 understand that honor and nobility are not a function of
357 our birth – but of the manner in which we choose to live

358 our lives.

359

360 When we acknowledge the errors of our nation's past, we
361 do so in shared dedication to building a better, stronger
362 future for this great country.

363

364 And when we act upon our American values of equality
365 and justice, we also take those steps to make our great
366 nation more secure.

367 These are my thoughts for you on this memorable
368 evening.

369

370 Once again, I thank Vice Admiral Fowler and all of you
371 for inviting me.

372

373 I am honored to be here with you tonight.

374