

## KERREY TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Pierce:

Good evening. My name is Al Pierce. I'm the Director of the Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics. To those of you who are visitors, welcome to the Naval Academy. To all of you, welcome to the inaugural lecture in a lecture series sponsored by the Ethics Center, in which we will be bringing distinguished men and women from different walks of life here to the Academy to share their experiences, insights, and reflections on matters related to ethics. We hope that by doing so we can contribute to one of the major program goals of the Ethics Center: to enrich the intellectual life of the Academy in the field of ethics. I would like to acknowledge in particular the presence this evening of the midshipmen from NE203, the core ethics course, and, by a remarkable coincidence -- not by foresight of planning -- we're having this lecture on moral courage in public life in the same week that they are studying "The Moral Leader."

We gather this evening in Mahan Hall, a historic building here at the Academy, named after Alfred Thayer Mahan, the father of modern naval strategy. Two of the singular contributions, I think, of his classic book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, were to look at navies and what they do in a broader context, and to tie all of that to the larger purposes of the nation. It's fitting that we begin this series here in Mahan Hall, because that is what we hope and expect our speakers to do: to look at what we do in a broader context, and to tie that to the larger goals of the nation. I have no doubt that our speaker this evening will set us out on precisely the right course. To introduce our speaker, it's now my pleasure to introduce to you the 56<sup>th</sup> Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy, Vice Admiral John Ryan.

Vice Admiral Ryan:

Good evening. I'm terribly excited about tonight's program. We could not have a finer individual to launch this very important ethics lecture series than Senator J. Robert Kerrey. His official biography is in your program, and I encourage you to read it. However, I'll mention a few things: It's important to note that Senator Kerrey is a former Navy SEAL, a highly decorated Vietnam War veteran, and a recipient of the nation's highest award for valor -- the Medal of Honor. He served as the governor of the state of Nebraska from 1983 to 1987. He won an overwhelming election to the Senate in 1988 and was re-elected to a second term in 1994. Senator Kerrey is nationally recognized as a leader who has earned the respect of his peers in the Senate and the American public. A man of action and a man of reflection, he reminds us, in his own words, that "good laws must be planted in the firm soil of a shared moral tradition, rather than the shifting sands of political convenience." His topic this evening is "Moral Courage in Public Life." Please join me in a warm Naval Academy welcome for Senator J. Robert Kerrey.

Senator Kerrey:

Thank you very much. I want to thank Admiral Ryan for that very kind introduction, and Dr. Pierce for the invitation to speak here this evening. I'd like to first ask if there are any Nebraskans in the house. (Applause.) Any future SEALs in the house? (Loud applause.) Well, anyway, I appreciate very much the opportunity to talk to all of you. I want to say at the outset, and I will repeatedly say in my remarks, how I as an American citizen, 55 years of age and long past my time of serving my country, want to tell you how I personally, and how I believe all Americans collectively, appreciate, admire, and respect your choice to serve all the people in the United States of America, and to serve the cause of peace and freedom as well.

Now, I am very honored to have a chance to inaugurate this lecture series on ethics. I appreciate very much that, while on many campuses ethics is much more of an academic subject, here it is more than just a subject of abstract conversation. Here, the subject of ethics is the objective of your education. It is, I presume to be correct, a living code, contained in two simple sentences that I read prior to preparing my remarks and which impress me with their conciseness and with their power: “Midshipmen are persons of integrity. They stand for that which is right.”

Note that I call these sentences simple, and for me it’s a grammatical use of the word simple, because I do not believe that these words are by any means simple words to live by.

Those of you in the Academy’s ethics course are assigned this week to study the Greek Epictetus, and you are also studying not just this Stoic philosopher, but also the connection between this philosopher and one of my greatest heroes and a graduate of this Academy, Admiral Jim Stockdale.

Admiral Stockdale found strength in Epictetus’s words while he was held in captivity; and all of us who have the pleasure of meeting Jim Stockdale find strength in the example that he has set, not just in surviving, but also in surviving with his dignity intact and with his dignity enhanced.

Admiral Stockdale is a moral leader. And if you are to be moral leaders, you, like Admiral Stockdale, will have to search for strength amid solitude. By this, I don’t mean that I expect you

to spend your years in the hell of an enemy prison. Indeed, I hope and will pray that the opposite will be the case, and I will speak more directly to that in a moment. Instead, I mean quite simply that morality in public leadership is defined chiefly in private moments -- those solitary times when the leader is left alone with his or her conscience, and a decision, and nothing else.

In a democracy, a nation's public character is built, brick by brick, by the private moral decisions of its citizens.

The topic that you have assigned me this evening is "Moral Courage in Public Life." I begin by saying that I hope you do not infer, by my acceptance of this topic, that I hold myself up to be a paragon of it. I try instead to live my public life by a moral standard like other humans. I strive for that goal, and I pray that on a good day I reach it as often as I fall short.

Instead, I want to suggest to you some different ideas of what it means to exercise moral courage in public life. And as I do, I will try to heed the words of Epictetus, who said that first you must learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak.

I will try to live by those words tonight, and I will try to live understanding that we in politics very often do not live by those words, and indeed if we did, Congress would be a much quieter place.

I will start with this quote and a different quote as well from the great Stoic: “No great thing is created suddenly, any more than is a bunch of grapes or figs. If you tell me that you desire a fig, I answer you there must be time. But at first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen.”

The most daunting challenge of any leader is to take the time to build. Great nations, like grapes or figs, do not spring from the earth on command. They are grown from the soil of common values, watered always with sweat and sometimes with blood, and tended by leadership. Each American generation has been called to water the garden, from those who created a nation in revolution, to those who kept it whole, to the heroes of Flanders and Normandy Beach, to those like Admiral Stockdale who fought in the Cold War against Communism.

Like them, you were called upon to lead, to grow a great nation. Like them, you will face this challenge. When it comes to building a great nation, you must persuade Americans to do the difficult job, to choose the course that will require effort, as opposed to choosing the course that leads to mediocrity.

What I mean by this is that in the era in which you will be called upon to lead, in many ways you will have a more difficult time than my generation, my parents’ generation and my grandparents’ generation. And what I mean by that is that, in eras of conflict, the times are more convenient creators of history than are the eras, such as the one we live in today, of great comfort. Previous generations of Americans lived in the former, and you will, at least by comparison, inherit the leadership of the latter.

Conflict is like a blazing fire, and history is like an iron rod -- plunge the iron of history into the flame of conflict, and history comes up pliable and soft and ready to be shaped by those with the courage to grab hold of it.

But what of your moment in history? What of your generation's greatness? God willing, conflict on the scale your ancestors faced will not make history so pliable to your touch.

The call to arms will still be sounded, as it is on this night in the skies over Kosovo, and heroes like you will still be called upon to answer. By and large, though, your fire will be stoked, not by conflict, but by commitment -- commitment to exercising moral courage in public life, to building a nation whose greatness is defined by opportunity at home, rather than opposition at war.

This decision to lead, to strive for greatness, to rise above complacency without the prodding of danger, and to encourage your fellow citizens to join with you requires moral courage in public life. The greatness of the nation you will lead will be defined by your commitment to moral courage, the courage to lead, a moral commitment to others, and the heroism of daily life.

I was struck, as I often am, as I was preparing for this speech, by looking at what my audience has to live under -- and your Academy's Honor Concept is not just short, it's noble.

“Midshipmen are persons of integrity. They stand for that which is right.” And as I said, what strikes me about this is not just the brevity of the statement, not just that it has to do with preparing you for fighting wars, but how it prepares you for living life.

The honor concept has a lot to do, of course, with fighting wars, because you cannot fight one effectively while commanding, or being commanded by, people who lack integrity.

But there was another lesson in those words, a lesson in moral courage in public life.

What do I mean by moral courage in public? I mean the use of public life to achieve moral objectives. And tonight I'd like to tell you a story about one of these objectives, and it's called patriotism.

This is a story of one American -- a man who lost faith in his country, whose love became bitter disappointment when he discovered that his leaders had lied to and betrayed him. Before the betrayal he was patriotic. Afterwards, he was not. Before, he believed in his country; afterwards, he distrusted it. Then, much later, his love came back, his patriotism returned.

The story that I will describe briefly is my story. It begins, like most human stories, with the father.

In my case, my father was orphaned at the age of one. And at the age of six, being raised by an aunt in Chicago, he lived at a time when, across the Atlantic Ocean in Paris, leaders were dividing the spoils of the Great War.

Eight million men had died in combat, in unimaginable, horrific combat. It was supposed to be “the war to end all wars.” But within twenty years, war had engulfed the world again. My father was a soldier in this one; his brother John was one of the fifty million men who were killed in that war.

Well, America won the war. And after the war, our economy boomed, our values were ascendant abroad, and we were triumphant at home. A self-confident generation came home proud and patriotic, and deserved it all. They had quite literally saved the world.

It was into this world, where all looked bright, that I was born. I grew up patriotic, trained in an America flushed with victory and certain of its beliefs. I never doubted that my country and its leaders were right and good. For me, patriotism was never a choice. It was simply an instinct. My growing-up years were typical. I went to church, I had a paper route, I went to college where I got a degree in pharmacy, and I assumed I would play out a life of conformity and quiet happiness.

Then, in 1965, I got a letter in the mail from a government agency, giving me the opportunity to take a free physical examination. Well, I passed the examination, and was told that I would soon be given the chance to have my character built in the United States Army. I had just read

Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, and for whatever reason, decided that I wanted to be in the world's largest and most powerful Navy. I volunteered for the Navy, volunteered for underwater demolition, and throughout my training my confidence grew, as I learned from my instructors that I could do things I had previously thought were impossible.

I went to Vietnam a patriotic, self-assured, young man. There I saw men being killed and I saw men killing. And then, on an unusual night in 1969, a grenade exploded at my feet. I was flown to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, where my leg was amputated below the knee.

And in a moment my world collapsed. I went from a very confident individual, believing that I could do everything on my own, to an individual who could not walk, could not leave his bed, could not do a simple thing like go to the bathroom without asking someone for help.

And as I recovered, I learned about my war. Where my father's war had been a national passion waged on moral clarity, my war became a war that was waged on political lies that extinguished the flame of patriotic love that had burned in my heart. Before, I doubted nothing about the rightness of my country and its leaders, and afterwards, I doubted everything.

But the story has a happy ending. It's a story of patriotism recovered, and patriotism redoubled; of teeth that were clenched in anger giving way to eyes shedding tears of gratitude because two things happened to change my view. First, my country saved my life. Having to ask for help transformed my view of the world. When I asked for help, it was my country that answered. When the bottom fell out of my life, my country helped me put it back together. The

second thing that happened was -- though I still believe my war was a terrible mistake -- years later I went back to Vietnam, and what I discovered were people grateful that young men had traveled thousands of miles across the ocean not to fight for themselves, not fight for money, not to fight for property, but to fight for the freedom of people that they did not know.

Well, both of these things caused the flame of patriotism to be rekindled into my heart, and today it burns brighter than ever before.

Looking back on my experience from the distance of thirty years, I understand the comfort Admiral Stockdale found in Epictetus's words. Epictetus said, and I advise: "Reckon the days in which you have not been angry. I used to be angry every day, now every other day, then every third and fourth day, and if you miss it as long as thirty days, offer a sacrifice of Thanksgiving to God."

Well, for me the moral of this story is that my patriotism is strong today because it is a choice. I discovered it in my conscience, not in commandments from others. I discovered patriotism, and the bounty and the beauty of a nation where someone like myself, who had never made a contribution to a politician, deserved to have a law that said his country was going to give him a chance to put his life back together. And a nation whose people were willing to risk everything - everything -- for the freedom of people that we did not know.

Those who saved my life, and those who fought for freedom, those who passed the laws that made it possible for me to put my life back together: These men and women showed moral courage in their public life.

The parents who raised me, the teachers and coaches who inspired me, the SEAL Team and Ranger instructors who taught me I could do more than I ever dreamed possible: They exhibited moral courage in public life. And so, I pray, will you.

This is the spirit of patriotism. Patriotism rejects the easy temptation of cynicism in favor of the daunting challenge of serving. Patriotism heeds the summons to greatness when the call to comfort is more tempting. Patriotism fears not lost popularity, but lost promise -- the promise lost when we sleep-walked through a cozy time, rather than challenging ourselves to a higher calling.

And that, looking to your world, brings me to the challenge of your patriotism, your moral courage in public life. The challenge of building a great nation.

For my grandfather's generation, for my father's generation and mine, danger knocked. For yours, opportunity knocks. And make no mistake, danger is a better attention-getter.

No draft notices called you to duty. And, God willing, no foreign troops will land on our shores and demand we seize the opportunity, in no small part because our nation is dedicated to

training the finest military leaders and equipping you with the finest military hardware in the world.

Your generation's greatness, your moral courage, will be defined by the decision to serve, by your dedication to a patriotism that places others above yourselves, and by your commitment to lead.

Just as my patriotism grew stronger when it became a choice, your leadership will be stronger because it is a choice as well. Because you choose to lead, you choose to serve. You choose to show moral courage even when danger does not demand it.

Now, I'd like to return for a moment to your Honor Concept, for this patriotism, and that honor, and the challenge to lead -- all are bound up in one another.

Militaries are built to defend nations. And our nation is unique. It's been said that what separates Americans from other people is that other countries are connected by a plot of land. They are dedicated to a plot, but America is dedicated to a proposition. We are training you to lead in defending that proposition. And this proposition -- that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- is bound up in honor and integrity.

Its soul is that men and women are capable of, and ennobled by, freedom. And you cannot bake the recipe of freedom without the ingredients of honor and integrity.

If you are to build a great nation, you must lead with integrity. The most daunting, challenging career of your lives is being a citizen in a democracy. For in a free society you cannot lead if you do not tell the truth. In some societies, leaders persuade citizens with brute force, but in ours, we forego terror for talking, weapons for words, and bombs for bombast.

Trying to lead in a free society with words that have no meaning is like trying to fight a war with weapons that have no ammunition.

If you are to build a great nation, you must lead people to do the uncomfortable, the unseen, and perhaps even the dangerous. And if you are to lead a free society, you must be a person of integrity. You must stand for that which is right.

Leaders must do what they would rather not do, and encourage others to do the same -- the lesson the United States is teaching in the skies and seas of Southern Europe.

These things require moral courage in public life. And those who choose to exercise that courage must stand ready to accept its consequences. Leadership, when it's the genuine article, brings scorn as often as glory, solitude as frequently as the company of friends.

Spread before me is a vast and very impressive sea of white. Each of you has a name and a family and a story and a dream, and I'd genuinely like to know them all. But chances are I will not leave here today knowing very many of your stories, or even very many of your names, or,

for that matter, even very many of your faces. But military schools do not school officers in the art of personal glory. Your choice to serve is an anonymous one. My choice to serve is also anonymous. I was one amongst thousands, as you are as well.

But my choice, by comparison, was a more obvious one, and easier as a consequence. My country was at war, and I went. As a result of a battle in that war, I was given a medal, about which you were told at the beginning of this speech of mine. Well, I will tell you that I almost didn't accept that medal, because I thought it dangerous to believe that the only heroism worth honoring occurs on the battlefield, not when the cameras are clicking or when the choice is clear.

To me you are the heroes. You chose to serve when there was little reason to do so, save your dedication to a proposition. You chose to serve when no one was looking, without the promise of glory or money or medals.

That is moral courage in public life. It's far better, it seems to me, to win a medal for moral courage: for parents who raise children against the odds, or for neighbors who brave each other's scorn to challenge old ideas, and for those like you who choose to serve.

My sense is that today, in 1999, a decision for service is a radical choice, outside the mainstream -- and the signs are everywhere. The services have significant recruiting shortfalls; the Navy today is short about twenty thousand sailors in shipboard assignments. All the services are struggling and are planning to add funds and people to recruiting. Retention of mid-career personnel is a problem as well. The propensity to serve and to keep serving is dropping. And

we all know the reasons. The economy is strong, so a hitch in the lower-paid military is less attractive. Pay and benefits have not kept up. Deployments are more frequent, time away from home station is increased, and family life is harder to maintain.

These are the well-known reasons for our personnel shortages. But I can think of another that troubles me even more, because it is more difficult to fix, and will be fixed only by your leadership. And that is that our public culture, regrettably, is too much about self-satisfaction, moneymaking, and power over others.

It is very little about the heroism and self-sacrifice and building a nation, what you are about. It is very little about service to country. And yet, thanks for those who make daily sacrifices in places not considered stylish by our public, America is safe and America is free.

All of our young people have little fear about the threats that are deterred by our military, and even less knowledge of the daily acts of heroism that are committed by all of you.

We have given our children role models whose only motive is self-interest. And then we are surprised to find, in a phenomenon that must be very rare in history, that our children are more cynical than their elders. But, I say, you are the antidote to that cynicism. By choosing to serve because you are dedicated to building a great nation, you are exercising moral courage in public life.

As you proceed on your personal journeys, the challenge of moral courage in public life will grow, and my challenge to you is to define moral courage this way.

Show the moral courage to do for your fellow citizens what my country did for me. Commit yourself and your country to saving and enriching the lives of others. Show the moral courage to lead, to insist that your nation strive for greatness, when it prefers complacency. Show the moral courage to brave bullets abroad, if that duty calls. But also answer the call of a certain duty, to brave conventional wisdom here at home.

I told you earlier that each of these is a lonely choice, requiring of you a solitude that is a distant cousin of the one that Admiral Stockdale knew very well. Well, maybe that sounds bleak, as our leadership and patriotism are merely stoic tasks that are done in self-denial and isolation. But I don't mean it that way.

I told you earlier that moral courage in public life is defined by the solitary moments when the leader is left alone with his or her conscience -- and I cannot imagine a warmer companion.

So I choose to end where I began, where a heroic leader like Admiral Jim Stockdale found comfort, with the words of Epictetus: "When you have shut your doors and darkened your rooms, remember never to say that you are alone, for you are not alone, for God is within and your genius is within. And what need have we, have they, of light to see what you are doing."

You wear the uniform of the world's most powerful Navy, because you have already committed yourself to moral courage and public life. You are persons of integrity. You are committed to that which is right.

And tonight at "lights out," when you have shut your doors and darkened your own room, you will find yourself in the company of the closest companion, the most reliable ally, and the warmest friend you will ever know: your own conscience. Thank you very much.