

Remarks by Thomas B. Modly
Acting Secretary of the Navy
Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, Hampton Roads, VA
December 10, 2019

Thank you, Amy (Carrier, President of Bon Secours) for that very kind introduction, and thanks to you, Bryan (Bryan Stephens, President of Hampton Roads Chamber), and the rest of the Hampton Roads Chamber for the honor of your kind invitation to speak here today.

As some of you may know, this is my second trip here as Acting Secretary of the Navy – my first was to participate in the christening of the newest United States Ship John F. Kennedy, CVN-79, on Saturday.

This was a spectacular event, with profound historical significance, that continues the legacy of the proud ties of this community to our naval heritage.

But despite the triumph of that day for our Navy, our souls have been deeply marked with great sorrow after the senseless, horrific losses of life within our own naval family over the last few weeks.

One not far from here in Little Creek, others in Pearl Harbor last Wednesday, and, of course, the tragic events of Friday morning in Pensacola.

We are determined, as one naval family, to find the causes of these senseless murders, and to stand united, for they are truly crimes committed against all of us, as members of the broadest definition of the U.S. naval service—sailors, marines, contractors, law enforcement, and everyday Americans who rely on the Navy to keep us safe and free.

The accounts of immense courage, particularly in Pensacola, are still to be fully collected; but what we do know is the bravery of three heroes wearing the cloth of our Nation, who ran towards danger on an early Friday morning, in a schoolhouse of all places, where it was least expected, and made the ultimate sacrifice for their brothers and sisters:

- Airman Mohammed Sameh Haitham, 19, of St. Petersburg, Florida;

- Airman Apprentice Cameron Scott Walters, 21, of Richmond Hill, Georgia;
- And, Ensign Joshua Kaleb Watson, 23, from Coffee County, Alabama, who had just graduated from the United States Naval Academy in May of this year, at a ceremony that I saw in person.

It was a day of jubilation for Ensign Watson and his classmates. A day focused on the future, on HIS future.

We are all heartbroken that he will not fulfill it as he imagined it on that day. But his sacrifice will not be in vain.

We pray for their families, and for those even now fighting for their lives in hospital.

Directly after this event, I am heading south to Pensacola meet with them, and the incredible security response teams there, from the Navy and Escambia County, and other civilian and uniformed leaders in the Pensacola area.

In trying times, some may wonder whether it is appropriate to keep appointments like these, but there is a higher purpose, one beyond all of us here today.

It faintly reminds of how Sir Winston Churchill felt about the appropriateness of his own speech at Harvard in 1943, in the midst of a World War for the free peoples of the world, the fate of whom at that time was far from decided.

Churchill asked himself much the same question in his speech, and recalled how during the Blitz over London, in 1941, he had kept his appointment for a similar ceremony:

“The blitz was running hard at that time, and the night before, the raid on Bristol had been heavy. Several hundreds had been killed and wounded. Many houses were destroyed.

“Buildings next to the University were still burning, and many of the University authorities who conducted the ceremony had pulled on their robes over uniforms begrimed and drenched; but all was presented with faultless ritual and

appropriate decorum, and I sustained a very strong and invigorating impression of the superiority of man over the forces that can destroy him.”

And as I look out over this audience today, just as I was honored on Saturday at a christening ceremony to look out over the thousands of proud shipyard workers, Sailors and Marines, and proud citizens of the Hampton Roads area, I know that in times like these we, as Americans, and as a Navy family, never retreat in the face of adversity. We don't give up the ship. We fight on.

Within each of us, we must embrace that same honor, that same decorum, that same superiority of men and women over forces that also mean to destroy us, as Churchill described. Perhaps not with massive kinetic means as in the World Wars of the past, thankfully, but in ways that equally threaten our very way of life.

In short, our national security – economic, naval, and political security alike – places a great premium upon the people of Hampton Roads.

- For here are the dedicated shipbuilders who ensure our future strength.
- Here are the suppliers and teammates who maintain and prepare our fleet.
- Here are the innovative researchers who sharpen the blade.
- And most importantly, here live the many military families who call this patriotic community home.

Many of you are part of the larger family of military and naval service, something of which my wife Robyn and I are especially proud.

You know, Robyn and I met just before my last flight in the UH-1N Huey on board USS NASSAU. (short story of meeting in Virginia Beach). We happened to miss the deployments and long separation while serving on the ship.

And, although I think Robyn may have wished for one or two deployments on occasion... we are well aware that many of the families here in Hampton Roads will have an empty chair at the table this holiday season because a family member is a sailor or marine who is standing the watch as their duty calls them to do.

We will always think of ourselves as a Hampton Roads Navy family.

And we are aware of and thankful for the many sacrifices extraordinary Americans like those here in the Tidewater region, and throughout our great nation make to protect us all.

In his final address to the nation, President Ronald Reagan explained that he saw the United States as “A tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace – a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.... A beacon for all who must have freedom.”

And as President Reagan knew so well, and taught us all: protecting that city, and maintaining that beacon of freedom, must be done through strength and preparation.

Today, it is our duty to ask ourselves if we are making the right investments, sparking the right innovation and bringing the right capabilities to bear, so we can continue to stand not just for our freedom, our peace, and our prosperity, but that of the entire world.

We must ask today if we see clearly the causes that have contributed to our gradual loss of competitive advantages enjoyed since the end of World War II.

And we must think anew of how we must prepare a future naval force with the kind of agility to overcome these factors, and protect our American way of life.

A few weeks ago, when I unexpectedly took the chair of Acting Secretary, foremost on my mind when thinking about that future was the very same thing that had been on my mind as the Under Secretary for over two years:

Creating the kind of agility and accountability our future force needs to prevail for the security of our Nation.

You know, after we left NASSAU and Hampton Roads, Robyn and I settled in Colorado Springs, where I took a job as an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the U.S Air Force Academy.

Teaching those cadets, especially during early morning classes, I would have to resort to some pretty creative and sometimes even devious means of capturing their attention.

Maybe like many of you, in the late 1980s, I would try to stay awake past 11:30 pm to watch "Late Night with David Letterman."

But almost every night before teaching class, I would make sure to catch Dave's "Top Ten" before I went to bed.

Because there were many times, in those Top Ten lists, I would find something interesting to mention in class that related to whatever we were studying at the time.

Secretary Mattis was once asked, "What keeps you up at night?"

He answered, "Nothing. I keep other people up at night."

I would have to say my answer would not be quite so self-confident. I would probably answer, "Nothing, I am too tired to be kept up at night."

So, I will rely on my old tried and true David Letterman technique and give you a Top Ten list.

Unfortunately, my list won't be nearly as humorous as Letterman's lists used to be, and there may not be many surprises, either, but you never know.

If you asked me to give you this list on November 16th, 2017, the day before I was confirmed by the U.S. Senate for this job, I am pretty sure the list would be different that it is today as Acting Secretary of the Navy.

But here goes...imagine the drum roll....

Tom Modly's Top Ten Things That If Things Kept Me Up at Night It Would be These 10 Things:

Number 10. Ships.
Number 9. Speed.
Number 8. Information.
Number 7. Cost.
Number 6. Audit.
Number 5. Education.
Number 4. Adversaries.
Number 3. Warriors.
Number 2. Time.
And...Number 1. Memories.

Now I am certain this last one may sound a bit perplexing to you. Memories?
Memories of what?

What I am referring to is our collective memories as a nation.

The common understanding of what is good about this place and what makes it so unique in the history of civilization.

In 1984, President Reagan captured this idea on the cliffs of Point Du Hoc in Normandy on the 40th anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Europe by Allied Forces.

Political analysts have used this speech to describe how brilliant it was “politically” because it tapped into a shared understanding of what Americans believed in their hearts, and their shared memories, about the sacrifices, and the reasons for the sacrifices, made by our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen on that day.

Reagan’s words were far more than political, however, and to judge them purely as such diminishes their power and authenticity.

The memory of Normandy that President Reagan evoked was real, not fabricated, it tapped into a collective consciousness in which moral clarity and pride in American sacrifice and achievement were unambiguous.

So why is “memory” number one on the list of the things that would keep up at night if things actually kept me up at night?

Because it keeps me up every waking hour with concern that we may be losing that shared memory as a nation, as powerful forces in the media, politics, academia, and nefarious foreign actors who are adept at manipulating all of these institutions, seek to create a new shared memory for Americans focused on our historical flaws, our past injustices, our cultural and racial differences, and our inability to secure an impossible utopian ideal for our society.

Around this time last year, Robyn and I had the honor of hosting a native son of Virginia, Mr. Emory Crowder, at a performance of the Messiah near our home in Annapolis. Emory is a 95-year-old veteran of World War II, and a recipient of the Silver Star. He served as a corpsman in the Marine Corps.

He stormed the beaches in Saipan and Tinian, and saved lives under fire with what equipment he could. For his bravery, he was rewarded with the opportunity to invade Okinawa. He never made it, as his ship was sunk by a Kamikaze pilot, and he was rescued from the cold Pacific Ocean a few hours later.

I’ll never forget how after that performance of the Messiah, he was surrounded by midshipmen who took pictures with him and thanked him for his service. In response to these midshipmen, all of whom were born well after the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, Emory simply said,

“Thank you, I did it so that you could have THIS life.”

And what are those young Mids doing with this life? They are stepping forward to serve, to forge the next link in the chain.

Emory Crowder is what is GOOD about our nation. Those mids are what is GOOD about our nation. Those young Navy heroes who stepped into the line of fire to save their classmates in Pensacola last Friday are what is GOOD about our nation.

And that is the shared memory we must fight to preserve.

We cannot ask people to defend this nation if we don't believe the nation is good – and worth defending. In my opinion, it is immoral to do so.

We need to embrace fully, and nurture the shared memories of the past that reinforce this, not blindly, but with a renewed sense of belief that we can address our problems, and strive for a more perfect union each day.

A union that worthy of every soul who puts his or her life in harm's way to keep us safe, and free.

For we have been here before, and sometimes, it is important to place the events of our lives into a different perspective.

In 1943, Churchill ended that speech at Harvard with these words:

“Let all of us who are here remember that we are on the stage of history, and that whatever our station may be, and whatever part we have to play, great or small, our conduct is liable to be scrutinized not only by history but by our own descendants.”

I think we would agree today. We are at an inflection point in the history of our country. And it is especially true for the citizens of Hampton Roads, who have such a crucial role to play in creating our naval readiness, and in building and sustaining our naval future.

For it is what we do now for the future of our national security that counts the most.

Not just for ourselves, but most importantly, for our children, and their children's children.

When you see them, thank and encourage our Sailors and Marines---and be grateful that someone in their lives told them that serving in the naval service of the United States of America was a good and honorable thing to do.

May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless this Nation. Go Navy, Go Marine Corps, Go Hampton Roads, and of course, as always, BEAT ARMY.