

The University of the South
Commencement Address May 22, 2021
Admiral James Stavridis

TO RISK IT ALL: THE HARDEST CHOICES WE MAKE

I want to begin by congratulating the many awardees and above all, the students. Let me start with Vice-Chancellor Brigety, my dear friend Reuben, fellow Annapolis graduate. It's the honor of a lifetime to be here on the Mountain with all of you. Actually, when I was told that I was on the short list to become the speaker, I thought maybe it was a list of short people. The idea being that they could find somebody shorter than the vice-chancellor; that mission has been accomplished.

Reuben told me that it's kind of traditional to speak for about an hour and a half in Latin. So I'm hoping everyone's comfortable. No, I'm going to start with the most important thing I'm going to do in a very brief address. I'm going to ask this deeply historic class of 2021, stand up and turn to your parents and give them a round of applause, please. What could be more important than thanking the people who love you more than anybody on this earth?

Thank you very much, class of 2021. And let me also acknowledge the faculty. I spent five years as a dean. I know what it is to be a faculty member. I know what it is to be a dean. It is a career of service in every sense. So I applaud all of you for being part of this spectacular university. When I started to think about doing a talk here, like anybody else, I kind of hit the internet. I wanted to get a sense of this extraordinary place, its history, its complexity, the big issues. So I started on Pinterest—because they have the best memes. Of the 13 highest ranked memes I could find about Sewanee, six of them basically dealt with what dorm you were going to live in, four of them dealt with hiking a trail, and one of them, my personal favorite, was a picture of Jennifer Lawrence with a really “mean girl” look on her face holding a long bow. And it said, "Room draw, may the odds be ever in your favor." I hope that carries on in your life. I'm sure it will.

So having completed Pinterest, of course, I turned to Facebook and I found an article entitled "Seven Things I Wish I knew Before Freshman Year at Sewanee". It had a lot of good ideas. It had one section on party life. It said, and I'm quoting, "Let's be real. We're a bunch of

college students on top of a mountain with basically nothing to do and drinking happens." Here's the important part. "Most drinking happens on Thursday through Saturday nights, but sometimes parties happen on Tuesdays and occasionally on Wednesdays." I want to congratulate you on "Dry Monday." I'll conclude with my journey through Facebook with a quote that I really liked. Quote, "There is not any real pressure to drink though. In fact, many students party completely sober and have just as much—if not more—fun than those who drank." I'm not making that up. And I want to ask the chancellor to investigate whether administrators are posing as students on Facebook.

All right, let me be serious. I've heard of Sewanee for decades through knowing many distinguished alums: Jon Meacham, good friend Admiral Frank Kelso, chief of naval operations, other admirals. And of course my dear friend, Mary Claire Murphy, who herself is a proud alumna and a Sewanee double mom. And I want to congratulate her daughter Ginnie on Phi Beta Kappa and winning the Art History Award. So I've had the connections here with Sewanee, but this is my first time to come to the Mountain and it is much more beautiful, much more historic than I could've imagined. This is my first trip. It will not be my last trip. Yea, Sewanee's Right.

So here's what I want to talk about today and I'll do it quickly. I want to talk about choices. Both of your valedictorians mentioned this idea of choices, and here's the point I want to make. One is obvious: As you leave this place, you'll be faced with lots of choices and here's the good news. Generally, you'll have time to think about them. You'll have time to think about the kind of decision process that brought you to Sewanee. Good call. You'll have time to think about who you want to marry. You'll have time to think about where your career will go. You'll have time to think about when to start a family. You'll have time to ponder those decisions, but what I want to make a point of today, because I have faced it a few times in my life, is that occasionally a choice will come at you fast.

It'll come at you suddenly, and you will be forced by the timeline in front of you to make a decision now. It could be a sudden instance that you see on a street corner. It could be a decision by a loved one's bedside in a hospital. It could be an incident in a mall. It could be being faced with a sudden choice in a relationship as an ultimatum is delivered. You may not believe it on this beautiful Saturday morning, but such choices, hard choices are in front of you. There will be moments, no matter where you go in life, where you will have to risk it all on a fast decision. Those are the hard ones, frankly. So let me give you just five minutes of thoughts on how you

get ready and how you make those kind of decisions. And to illustrate the proposition, I want to quickly tell you two stories about two Navy officers who faced that kind of decision and how it turned out.

One is named Admiral Michelle Howard. Admiral Howard is a four-star admiral in the U.S. Navy. She was the first African American woman to command a warship, the first African American woman to be a one-star, a two-star, a three-star, and a four-star. She is a spectacular leader, a combat leader. When Michelle was a one-star, she was the flag officer—the admiral—in charge of Captain Phillips, the rescue operation off the coast of Somalia. I suspect many of you have seen the film with Tom Hanks. In a nutshell, an American tanker is boarded by pirates. The captain is taken hostage. The captain is being held in a small lifeboat and Michelle Howard, brand new one-star, is in charge of the operation to rescue him. Let me tell you in a hostage situation, there's not a lot of time to ponder what you're going to do. You take your shot, literally or figuratively. Michelle had that shot to take. Three SEALs, three pirates, three gunshots. All three of the pirates went down. Captain Phillips was rescued. It was a bold plan, an audacious plan.

She took a hard decision and risked it all. She risked the life of Captain Phillips. She risked the lives of those SEALs. She risked her own career. The hard choice came fast. She made the right call. Let me give you a second example that doesn't turn out so well. This one is quite recent. In 2019, a Navy captain named Crozier is in command of an aircraft carrier. The carrier is the Roosevelt. By 2020, as you are all beginning to experience COVID-19 on this campus, on his aircraft carrier, 5,000 people were packed into a space maybe twice the size of this football field. Five thousand people were sailors berthed together in their sleeping quarters, about the size of your kitchen at home. Twelve sailors live in that space. It is not a place where social distancing is possible. So Brett Crozier is in command of this carrier and suddenly COVID runs wild through the ship.

Seventy percent of his crew is infected. He begins working to solve the problem, just like the vice-chancellor did here. And he did all the right things in my view, working with the Navy chain of command, but he was getting nowhere. His ship ended up tied up in Guam. He had hundreds, if not thousands, of crew members infected with COVID. And finally in real desperation, he saw that he had to, if you will, launch a red flare. He sent an email, unclassified, and of course it leaked. And the email said to the Navy leadership, "You are failing me. You are

failing my ship. You are failing my crew." Crozier knew that that event would terminate his career in all probability. And frankly it did. The Secretary of the Navy fired him.

The Secretary of the Navy flew to the ship and delivered an address to the crew. Yet the crew, when Captain Crozier left the Roosevelt, stood as one with 5,000 people applauding him. He risked it all. In my view, he did the right thing for his crew, but his career ended. His honor did not.

So what can we take away from this as we conclude our brief time together? And what can I ask you to think about? Let me tell you what happens when those decisions come at you fast. You have to consciously try and slow your process, your mental process. You have to consider the outcomes, but not be paralyzed by them. You have to consider both the good and the bad outcomes because, as those two stories illustrate, so often in life it can be the flip of a coin on the outcome. Understand those choices.

Evaluate the resources. What can you bring to bear quickly? Whatever the circumstance or situation, if you are fortunate to be in a leadership position, focus on your people, but don't be paralyzed by fear. Michelle Howard knew those SEALs would risk their lives for Captain Phillips as part of their charter. Brett Crozier knew he had to risk his career for his crew. That is part of his remit as a commander at sea. You may be leading a three-person team at Google like my daughter Christina does, but I assure you, there will come times when you have to make hard decisions. Focus on your people, but don't be paralyzed about the outcome.

Here's another one. And it's maybe the hardest one. Don't get emotionally involved. Don't lash out in anger. Stay calm. And that's hard. Everyone has a different boiling point, but to the degree that you have a better chance of facing that hard decision when you are being asked to risk it all, the calmer you are the better it will come out. Be prepared to execute the minute you make the decision. Don't look back. This isn't like the SAT test where you were advised, never change your mind. And then now you're advised, yeah, you should probably change your mind. On these decisions you just have to move.

Last two comments. This may be the most important one. Here you are at this gorgeous university taught for four years by this spectacular faculty. But now is when *you* own your education. They have been telling you what to read and orchestrating your conversations

beautifully, functionally, powerfully for four years. Now you own that process. Your education is just beginning.

And in that context, you must continue to learn, to read, to pick up a novel and put yourself in the simulator of decision. Go back and reread *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel you probably read when you were 14 years old. Go back and reread it, and put yourself in that crucible of race and injustice and a young woman's coming of age. It's a spectacular novel about America in 2021. And ask yourself when you read it, if I were Atticus Finch, what decision would I make? That prepares you for when you have to make that decision.

Lastly, maybe the most obvious thing of all. Hold tight to your values when those moments come. Hold tight to your values when those moments come and ask yourself, what are my values? We can all recite the list, right? Democracy, liberty, freedom of speech, freedom of education, gender equality, racial equality. Look, we execute them imperfectly. But they're the right values for our nation. What I'm talking about are *your* values.

Are you kind to others? Thomas Aquinas said, "Be kind to all you meet for you know not what burden they carry." That's a value. Calmness is a value. Friendship is a value. Right and wrong are values. Above all as you exit this spectacular, idyllic place, ask yourself what are *my* values? Who are my heroes? Who do I deeply admire? Ask yourself that a lot. And if you do, you'll be ready when that moment comes, when you may be asked to risk it all.

It seems so far away on this sunny Saturday morning, but believe me, it waits for you. I have confidence in you, from all that I've learned about this university. I thank you for the honor of addressing you today. I look forward to hearing more about you. Remember to touch the roof when you go through the gate. Your angel will be with you. In the Navy, we say, "Godspeed and open water" to the class of 2021. Thank you very much.