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Service to America: Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia

April 1, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery during the second stop of his "Service to America" tour today at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia at 10:45 a.m. EST:

Thank you. I'm happy to be back at Episcopal, my alma mater, which I have many happy memories of, and a few that I'm sure former teachers, school administrators and I would rather forget. Until I enrolled at Episcopal, my education had been constantly disrupted by the demands of my father's naval career, which required us to move so often that I lost track of the number of schools I attended. My parents had resolved finally to put an end to our haphazard education and enrolled my sister, brother and me in boarding schools. I arrived here a pretty rambunctious boy, with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder. I was always the new kid, and was accustomed to proving myself quickly at each new school as someone not to be challenged lightly. As a young man, I would respond aggressively and sometimes irresponsibly to anyone whom I perceived to have questioned my sense of honor and self-respect. Those responses often got me in a fair amount of trouble earlier in life. In all candor, as an adult I've been known to forget occasionally the discretion expected of a person of my years and station when I believe I've been accorded a lack of respect I did not deserve. Self-improvement should be a work in progress all our lives, and I confess to needing it as much as anyone. But I believe if my detractors had known me at Episcopal they might marvel at the self-restraint and mellowness I developed as an adult. Or perhaps they wouldn't quite see it that way.

However much I was captive to the unruly passions of youth, which some of my classmates and friends at Episcopal could attest to as they shared more than a few of those attributes themselves, after a difficult first year adjusting to life here, I came to appreciate this place very much. Episcopal had borrowed some of its traditions from military academies. One in particular, bothered me a bit: the designation of first year students as "rats," and the mild hazing that accompanied the designation. Mild or not, I resented it, more than I should of, and I made my resentment clear in my usual immature ways to upperclassman and school officials, piling up demerits and earning the distinction at the end of the year of "worst rat." But, for whatever reason, Episcopal did offer me a home here, and if it regretted that decision, it didn't make it known through the usual means.

Memory often accords our high school years the distinction of being among the happiest of our lives. I remember Episcopal in that light. The academics were superb and serious, a testament to the many fine teachers here. Athletics were accorded almost equal weight, and I appreciated the opportunity it gave a mediocre athlete to participate in team sports. And the honor code here - I will not lie, I will not cheat, I will not steal -- was much the same as the code my parents had taught and which would govern my behavior at Annapolis and in the Navy. And if I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have, I learned to do so when my honor was challenged by more serious threats than I ever faced in high school. And I had good friends here, and those friendships make up the best parts of my remembrance.

There was one friendship that enriched my life at EHS beyond measure. Were William B. Ravenel the only person I remembered from Episcopal, I would credit those days among the best in my life. His influence in my life was more important and more benevolent than that of any person outside my family. Mr. Ravenel was head of the English Department, and coached the junior varsity football team, on which I played. He had been a star running back at Davidson College and had a master's degree in English from Duke. Like most men of his generation, he had known far greater danger than that posed by a tough defensive line. He had served in Patton's tank corps during the Third Army's aggressive advance across Europe, and had survived hard encounters with Hitler's panzer divisions. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, the only master at school who still served in the military.

He seemed to his students to be as wise and capable as anyone could expect to be. He loved English literature, and taught us to love it as well. He had a way of communicating with his students that was uniquely personal and effective. He made us appreciate how profound were the emotions that animated the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies. MacBeth and Hamlet in his care were as compelling to boys as they were to the most learned scholar. No other teacher had as much of our respect and affection. He was simply the best man at the school; one of the best men I have ever known.

As luck would have it, I was ordered to work off my demerits in Mr. Ravenel's yard. I don't know if school authorities were intentionally doing me a favor and knew that Mr. Ravenel would be able to help repair the all-too-evident flaws in my personality. Neither do I know why he took an interest in me. But I count the fact that he did among the most fortunate relationships in my life. I discussed all manner of subjects with him, from sports to the short stories of Somerset Maugham; from his combat experiences to my future. He was one of the few people to whom I confided that I was bound for Annapolis and a Navy career, and to whom I confessed my reservations about my fate.

In the fall of my senior year, a member of the j.v. football team had broken team rules. I cannot recall the exact nature of the offense, but it was serious enough to warrant his expulsion from the team. Mr. Ravenel called a team meeting, and most players argued the accused should be dropped from the roster. I offered the only argument for a less severe punishment.

The student in question had broken training. But unlike the rest of us, he had chosen at the start of the year not to sign a pledge promising to abide faithfully by the training rules. Had he signed it, I wouldn't have defended him. Moreover, he had confessed his offense and expressed remorse freely without fear of discovery. I thought his behavior honorable. So did Mr. Ravenel. But he kept his own counsel, preferring his boys to reason the thing out for ourselves. As we were doing so, Mr. Ravenel began to nod his head when some of the others began to take up the defense. Finally, he closed the matter by voicing his support for leniency.

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The team voted to drop the matter. After the meeting broke up, Mr. Ravenel told me we had been able to do, whether it is a public, private or parochial school. He said he had been anxious before the meeting, but had not wanted to be the one who argued for exoneration. He wanted the decision to be ours. He told me he was proud of me.

Every child should be blessed with a teacher like I had, and to learn at institutions with high academic standards and codes of conduct that reinforce the values their parents try to impart to them. Many students do have that opportunity. But too many do not. And government should be concerned with their fate. I supported the No Child Left Behind Act because it recognizes that we can no longer accept high standards for some students and low standards for others. With honest reporting of student progress we begin to see what is happening to students who were previously invisible to us. That is progress on its own, but we can and we must do better.

If a failing school won't change, it shouldn't be beyond the reach of students to change their schools. Parents should be able to send their children to the school that best suits their needs just as Cindy and I have been able to do, whether it is a public, private or parochial school. The result will not be the demise of the public school system in America, but competition that will help make public schools accountable and as successful as they should be in a country as great and prosperous as ours. Teaching is among the most honorable professions any American can join. After our parents, few people influence our early life as profoundly as teachers. Theirs is an underpaid profession, dedicated to the service of others, which offers little in the way of the rewards that much of popular culture encourages us to crave -- wealth and celebrity. But though it might lack much in the way of creature comforts and renown, teaching offers a reward far more valuable: the profound satisfaction that comes from knowing you have made a difference for the better in someone else's life. Good teachers occupy a place in our memory that accords them a reverence we give few others. We should be wise enough to understand that those who work diligently and lovingly to educate the children we entrust to their care, deserve the gratitude and support many of us wish we had given those of our own teachers, who once made such a difference in our own lives.

We should reward the best of them with merit pay, and encourage teachers who have lost their focus on the children they teach to find another line of work. Schools should compete to be innovative, flexible and student-centered institutions, not safe havens for the uninspired and unaccountable. They should be able to compete for dedicated, effective, character-building teachers, hire them and reward them. I believe we should encourage military veterans to enter the teaching profession, and I've advocated the Troops-to-Teachers Act. The sense of heightened responsibility and duty to a cause greater than themselves that veterans were taught in the discipline and code of conduct of the armed forces make many of them excellent candidates to impart those virtues to our children, and help them see the value of learning as a means to self-improvement and much nobler ends. There is no reason on earth that this great country should not possess the best education system in the world. We have let fear of uncertainty, and a view that education's primary purpose is to protect jobs for teachers and administrators degrade our sense of the possible in America. There is no excuse for it.

In the global economy what you learn is what you earn. But today, studies show that half of Hispanics and half of African Americans entering high school do not graduate with their class. By the 12th grade, U.S. students in math and science score near the bottom of all industrialized nations. We need to shake up failed school bureaucracies with competition, empower parents with choice, remove barriers to qualified instructors, attract and reward superior teachers, and have a fair, but sure process to weed out incompetents.

Speaking personally, I doubt I will ever meet another person who had the impact on my life that my English teacher at Episcopal High School did. But I know there are many Americans who should teach and could influence children as beneficially as he did me. All children should have a teacher like I had, who they remember when they have children and grandchildren as one of the most fortunate relationships of their lives.

I have never forgotten the confidence Mr. Ravenel's praise and trust in me gave me. Nor have I forgotten the man who praised me. Many years later, when I came home from Vietnam, Mr. Ravenel was the only person outside of my family whom I wanted to see urgently. I felt he was someone to whom I could explain what had happened to me, and who would understand. That is a high tribute to Mr. Ravenel. For I have never known a prisoner of war who felt he could fully explain the experience to anyone who had not shared it.

I regret that I was never able to pay him that tribute. He had died of a heart attack two years before I came home. He lived for only fifty-three years, but in that time he had made a life for himself and so many others that was so much greater than the brief moment of life he was allowed. His death was a great loss to his family, friends, Episcopal, to the students he had taught with such devotion and to everyone who had been blessed with his company, a loss I still find difficult to accept. But because he helped teach me to be a man, and to believe in the possibility that we are not captive to the worst parts of our nature, I will always believe that there is a Mr. Ravenel somewhere for every child who needs him.

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