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## Don't Ever, Ever Give Up the Ship

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*Under Secretary of the Navy*

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## DON'T EVER, EVER GIVE UP THE SHIP

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*The Under Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable Thomas Modly, was sworn in on January 5, 2018, at a ceremony at his alma mater, the United States Naval Academy. The following is an excerpt from his remarks.*

**T**oday's swearing-in ceremony is not about me or the office; it's really about the Department of the Navy and our nation's Navy and Marine Corps. Those of us who are privileged to serve in senior positions in the department are merely temporary stewards of an incredibly proud tradition of service, courage, commitment, and sacrifice. The Sailors and Marines who serve us today, and those who came before us, have kept this nation free and have secured liberty for millions of others beyond our shores. We in leadership have an obligation to defend the legacy of those who served and to protect those who serve us now. Most importantly—as we grapple with how our Navy and Marine Corps must evolve to address an increasingly complex global security environment—we must commit ourselves to creating strategies and capabilities that protect and empower those who will serve us in the future. The challenges we face—as a nation, and as a community of peace-loving people who aspire to build a world in which liberty, prosperity, and peace reign supreme—are pushing us to think differently about defense. For those of us in the naval service, these complex challenges compel us to consider how we must prioritize our investments and our organizational focus to maintain the maritime superiority that has served us and our friends around the world so well.

When I look at the recently published National Security Strategy of the United States, it becomes clear that our world has become increasingly complex, and that this complexity will require us to think creatively about how best to protect the nation. The four pillars of this strategy are to (1) protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life, (2) promote American prosperity, (3) preserve peace through strength, and (4) advance American influence around the world. Whether taken individually or in their totality, all four pillars are critically dependent on the sustainment of dominant naval forces that protect vital

sea-lanes for trade, build maritime bridges of understanding with our friends and allies, respond to natural disasters, protect our shores, and, when needed, dominate and defeat those who wish to do us harm. We must never let this element of our national power diminish because we were unwilling to abandon conventional thinking in a time of rapid change.

The Academy is one of the best places I can imagine to inspire creative thinking in this regard. As my classmates know—because it was drilled into us during plebe summer—every inch of the Academy Yard has significance in some form or another. Whether it is a statue, building, quote, monument, walkway, or staircase, you can't walk more than a few feet without being confronted with some long-standing tradition or piece of history that requires reflection, gratitude, or awe. I would like to focus on three of these iconic Academy touch points, because I believe they are particularly relevant to the challenges we face today as a Navy and Marine Corps team, and perhaps more broadly as a nation.

One of the first things a person sees while crossing the Yard is the multiple renditions of the Naval Academy crest, in both large and small forms—it is everywhere. Emblazoned on this crest is the motto of the Naval Academy: *Ex scientia tridens*. Roughly translated, those words mean “through knowledge, sea power.” As we think about the future of our Navy and Marine Corps, no words seem more relevant than these. While we surely must invest in more ships, aircraft, submarines, and armored vehicles and in new weapons systems, nothing will be more important than the investment we make in knowledge—and in creating a force made up of people who thirst for it. Rapid technological advances are driving the raw technical requirements for this mandate, but knowledge is not defined purely by technical competence. For knowledge to truly produce sea power, we must create a culture in the Navy and Marine Corps that is committed to learning as a lifelong process—and a lifelong passion. Such a culture is not defined merely by certificates or degrees accumulated at regular career intervals, but rather is one that encourages innovation and risk taking and produces Sailors and Marines who are prepared to excel in circumstances that are characterized by uncertainty and by adversaries who are agile and unpredictable. Most importantly, the thirst for knowledge we must foster has to be focused on how to fight—and how to win. We ask great sacrifices from our Sailors and Marines when we enlist them to enter a profession of arms. We ask them to defend us, our liberty, our ideals, and our Constitution, and we ask them to pledge their lives and honor to this mission. Therefore, we must make sure that no adversary is smarter or better prepared, or, simply put, more knowledgeable than they are with respect to what it takes to *fight* and *win*.

Without this commitment to learning and knowledge and an understanding that they translate into a more effective fighting force, we invite aggression and

risk catastrophes that are potentially devastating to our security as a nation and to everything we hold dear. This institution, as well as the Naval War College and the Naval Postgraduate School, must be at the center of this effort. When you look at the faculties and student bodies of these institutions, we should recognize that we have literally thousands of years of accumulated knowledge and experience directly applicable to the big questions we must answer as a naval service as we look forward into this new century. We must be aggressive in leveraging and sharing this knowledge and institutionalizing how we access it to advance sea power for the nation.

*Ex scientia tridens* should be our battle cry as we think about and execute the strategies for the Navy and Marine Corps of the twenty-first century. It is only through the elevation of knowledge as a core characteristic of the naval service that we will maintain our strategic and competitive advantages. It is only through knowledge that our sea power can be sustained.

The second most prominent feature in the Yard is the Naval Academy chapel, with the crypt of John Paul Jones, the father of the U.S. Navy. Of Jones's many memorable quotations, one in particular is the second point of inspiration and focus I would like to mention today. Jones famously said, "Men mean more than guns in the rating of a ship." Since John Paul Jones came of age during an era when only men served on naval ships of war, we are obligated to modify that great quote, adapting it appropriately to modern times. It loses nothing in the translation when we say, "People mean more than weapons in the rating of a service." Jones's quote recognizes a profound point of truth that is perhaps even more relevant today than it was over two hundred years ago.

Our maritime advantage is, and will continue to be, almost entirely dependent on the quality of our people. They are our most precious and limited resource, and so our efforts and focus must be on them if we are to retain our superiority on the seas. As I enter into this office, I have grave concerns that sixteen years of wartime operations, compounded by unpredictable, nonsensical, and disruptive budget cycles, have taken their toll on the quality of this, our most precious resource. As I prepared to take on this assignment, I spoke with many experts and observers of our Navy and Marine Corps who fear that we are approaching the point of creating a "hollow force": a force that is tired, underequipped, and not sufficiently trained, but that is being asked to do more and more with fewer platforms, less rest, and no relief in the operational tempo. Eventually, conditions like these will break our people; and as they go, so will go the rating of our "ship." We cannot allow this to happen, and Secretary Spencer and I are committed to reversing the trajectory of the last several years in this regard. The Secretary's Strategic Readiness Review, which he commissioned to examine the recent shipboard tragedies of USS *McCain* and USS *Fitzgerald*, have lessons for us that

extend beyond the surface Navy. We will address these issues head-on and will attack their root causes with ferocity, because we have an obligation to our people to ensure that *we respect them by protecting them*, while we ask them to pledge their lives to protect us.

There is no greater mission for us in the leadership of the Department of the Navy than to ensure that our Sailors and Marines can operate safely, but we also must think about how changing global circumstances will demand more of them and how we must facilitate changes in our professional culture so it is best suited to address and defeat those who may challenge us on and from the seas. As I mentioned in my Senate confirmation testimony a few months ago, we must advance *agility* when we think about our people. We need to recruit and train those who are innovative, creative, and courageous, people who are comfortable with uncertainty and who can collaborate and trust their teams and leaders under stressful conditions.

We also must tap into the vast knowledge and spirit of the private sector as partners with our men and women in uniform, as well as our civilian workforce. This emphasis will challenge the status quo. Necessarily, it must do so. Such challenges are not pain-free, and they will require the Navy and Marine Corps to think differently about themselves, but this can and should happen often with any organization that wants to survive in a world that is changing as rapidly, and as disruptively, as ours is. We must not resist this—we must embrace it.

To put it in context, examples of unconventional thinking changing the nature of our Navy and Marine Corps are not without precedent. One hundred and twenty years ago we had nearly 150 years of a professional naval service in the United States, but not a single naval aviator; seventy years ago we didn't have a single nuclear submariner; thirty-five years ago, not a single cybersecurity specialist or drone pilot. All these disciplines, and the creative thinking that inspired them, have been integrated into what many considered to be a proud, yet change-resistant culture that was steeped in tradition. Today, we can hardly imagine our Navy and Marine Corps forces without a large number of people with any one of these skills. These types of changes embodied new ways of thinking about naval force and how to deploy it. We must embrace this kind of innovation, but with urgency and at a faster pace, because the conditions require it.

What we cannot lose, however, is the warrior spirit and ethos that have carried our Sailors and Marines to victory over and over through the course of our history. These qualities must be refreshed and never allowed to atrophy. The prospect of a hollow force is the greatest threat to this ethos, and I will work tirelessly to ensure that we do not allow our budget and operational circumstances to decay the spirit of our forces any further. At the end of the day, the “rating of

our ship” is what will determine our collective fate as a maritime nation, and in this regard people will always mean more than guns.

Finally, the journey across the Yard ends here at Bancroft Hall—this massive building, the largest dormitory in the world. Memorial Hall is symbolic of the final point I would like to make today. It was here that everything I needed to know about the U.S. naval service came together into one, big, holistic picture. Most everything I learned in my classrooms, Nimitz Hall, and the chapel, and on the parade fields and athletic fields and in the gyms, was reinforced in Bancroft Hall. Here I was surrounded by some of the finest young people this nation has to offer, who eventually became cherished friends. It was here that I learned about leadership, integrity, honor, military history, commitment, struggle, spirit, camaraderie, and—perhaps most important of all to me—creativity and the power of a sense of humor. All these things were on display on a daily basis—none to perfection, but always with an implicit understanding of the value in seeking it. In this crucible I was exposed to people from every part of this country, of different races, ethnicities, and accents, and with different passions, strengths, and weaknesses—but all of them committed to the same ultimate goal, all pledging their lives to protect and defend the same document. It was, and is, a remarkable thing that happens here. It is a unique and precious reflection of the character of our country, and it is a microcosm of the qualities that define our United States Navy and Marine Corps.

As I stand here before you in Memorial Hall, you can see draped behind me one of its most famous artifacts: a replica of the flag that was raised high on the mast of Commodore Perry’s flagship, USS *Niagara*, during the battle of Lake Erie. What is inscribed on this flag is the final message I wish to impart to you today. Commodore Perry adorned this flag with the words of his dying comrade in arms, Captain James Lawrence, as Lawrence’s ship, USS *Chesapeake*, was being overrun by the British during the War of 1812. Captain Lawrence, mortally wounded from a gunshot, famously instructed his crew to sustain the battle with this final order: “Don’t give up the ship!” After Lawrence’s death, this phrase became the rallying cry for Commodore Perry, in honor of his fallen friend. Over the years it also has become a part of the lexicon and ethos of our naval service. In this broader service context, the “ship” that Captain Lawrence spoke of is really just a metaphor for something greater. When you read about the heroism displayed by our Sailors and Marines over the long course of U.S. history, you will see that this phrase precisely describes what they embodied in their character: *they don’t give up the ship*. They fight. They fight for the ship; they fight for each other; they fight for you.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, some predictable and some not, the burdens of their commitment and of this ethos of self-sacrifice are not truly understood by wider swaths of the American public, many of whom have no relationship with a person who is serving currently in the military. I fear that the values and selflessness embodied by this simple command is underappreciated by many in this country—perhaps too many—considering that everyone here benefits from the bravery it demands.

We as a nation and as a Department of the Navy certainly are faced with a long list of geostrategic threats. Russian revanchism; Chinese territorial and economic aggression; Iranian murder, mayhem, and mischief across the greater Middle East and beyond; North Korean flagrant violations of international norms regarding the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and general bellicosity; and the growing and morphing threat of Salafist-based global jihad are combining to overwhelm our ability to respond in traditional ways. Nonetheless, we face no greater threat than the erosion of the relationship between our naval service, its maritime mission, and our broader citizenry. To sustain our superiority on the seas we must *all* believe it is necessary to do so. It will require a renewed national mandate to invest in a linearly larger and geometrically more capable force. This cannot be done without the support of the American people, and through their elected representatives in Congress.

A popular question being asked today—and it has been asked of me countless times since I was nominated publicly for this position—is whether this future force should be 275 ships, 300 ships, 355 ships, or some other number. The right answer to this question, in my opinion, is 355 *plus*, because, while we certainly need more seagoing platforms, we also need to increase their lethality and their ability to operate in a networked fashion with both manned and unmanned assets that contain, restrain, confuse, overwhelm, and decisively defeat our enemies. This is an ambitious objective—but that, ultimately, is a very good thing. We must set our sights high right now on building the Navy and Marine Corps of the future, because the only thing we can say with confidence about that future is that it will require much more than we reasonably can ask of the forces we have today. So we as leaders of the Department of the Navy must mobilize ourselves and our fellow Americans to fight for the Navy and Marine Corps we need and that our Sailors and Marines deserve.

Today we are at an inflection point not entirely different from the one the Department of the Navy and the nation faced in 1979 when I was sworn in as a midshipman. We were still recovering from a post-Vietnam hangover that alienated the armed forces from the general population and created hollow-force issues in all the services. Thanks to extraordinary political leadership and our own

national resolve, we rebuilt our military and our Navy to the point where our primary geostrategic foe—a militarily strong and capable Soviet Union—was forced into retreat. This palpable national resolve—and the sacrifices of many people who passed through these very halls—contributed to the demise of the Soviet system, removed the imminent threat of military force on Western Europe, and led to a chain of unstoppable events that freed millions behind the Iron Curtain from Communist tyranny. There is no doubt that we honored the words of James Lawrence with how we responded as a nation during that era. We did not give up the ship then, and we must not give up the ship now.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a message that is directed mostly to anyone in this hall who served a full career in the Navy or Marine Corps, but most especially to my classmates from the class of 1983. My own tenure as an active-duty officer in the Navy was short, but those of you here who dedicated a career to the naval service after leaving this Yard with me in May of 1983 have my greatest respect, admiration, and thanks for your dedicated service. President John F. Kennedy said it best: “I can imagine no more rewarding a career. And any [person] who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worth while, I think [he or she] can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction: ‘I served in the United States Navy.’”

To my classmates, I want you to know that it is my great honor to represent you as I have this very unique and humbling opportunity to serve in the Navy again. You have my commitment that, as long as I have the privilege to serve as our Navy’s Under Secretary, *I will never, ever give up the ship.*

Thank you for being here. God bless you. And may God bless the Sailors and Marines who go in harm’s way on the seas, in the air, and on the land to keep us safe and free.