

Opening Remarks
National Conference on Ethics in America
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On behalf of the West Point Class of 1970, I want to extend a warm welcome to all of you to the 2016 National Conference on Ethics in America. We are profoundly grateful to General Caslen, General Holland, and Colonel Halstead for their gracious hospitality and unfailing support for this important gathering. We pledge our continued support for the conference and loyal partnership with West Point forever.

It was a hot August day in 1966, almost 50 years ago, when the new cadets of the West Point Class of 1970 assembled on the side of a barren hill at Lake Frederick, not far from here, to learn the results of our vote for the class motto that would define who we were as a class. Of the several options, the one that received the most votes also engendered the most discussion: Serve With Integrity, '70. WOW! It barely rhymed, and was an obvious departure from the audacious mottos of previous classes—Best Of The Line, '69; No Task Too Great, '68; or None Will Surpass, '67. Serve With Integrity, '70. An aspirational identity for a group of mostly teenagers who were just beginning the transition to adulthood.

If my memory is correct, it didn't take us long to recognize that our classmate who had suggested this motto understood that it embodied the very ideals of West Point; it described WHAT we would do throughout our lives—Serve—and HOW we would do it—With Integrity. During the first semester, our class Ring and Crest Committee set to work designing our class crest, which would represent us forever. The exercise was one of arranging certain required symbols—cadet and officer sabers, an American eagle, the letters USMA, and the class year—that would eventually be displayed on one side of our class rings. Recognizing the deep meaning of the motto, we petitioned the powers that be to allow us to also include it on our crest. To our great joy, this novel idea was approved, and ever since, all West Point class crests have included the class's motto.

Serve With Integrity. These three words have come to stand for who we are as a class; they have been the central focus of our life's work, in and out of uniform. To this day, classmates end email messages with “SWI”—Serve With Integrity—to affirm our shared commitment and to encourage one another to its high standard.

Serve With Integrity guided our deliberations as we considered a substantial gift to our alma mater that would embody our shared values. What we now know as the National Conference on Ethics in America—NCEA—is the result. Our intent was to nurture the character development of cadets through presentations by inspirational speakers and small group discussions on ethical issues in society. We also encouraged West Point to invite students from other colleges and universities to join in the conversation, with the understanding that the future of our country and the world would soon be in their hands. By nurturing the next generation, we raise the level of public discourse about matters that matter.

Serve With Integrity. These three words are both timeless and timely. Service—to help, to aid, to enable. Service puts others above self; an act of service transcends individual self-interests by orienting on the wellbeing of others. Service is a core component of every profession. In the military profession, we talk about the soldier’s identity as a servant of the nation. In law, the health professions, the ministry, engineering, accounting, architecture, education to name only a few, professionals provide a service to society. In government, we speak of public service and civil servants—making our government of, by, and for the people function effectively. The same is true in business—the service industry, financial services, travel services, investment services—all ideally devoted to helping or aiding others.

But how do we serve? For the Class of 1970, we strive to make integrity the foundation for our service. Integrity—upholding moral and ethical principles; a state of being whole, together, complete. Integrity means that our words and deeds are congruent; our beliefs and actions are in sync; our sense of self and our connections with others are completely whole. When we live with integrity, we are able to achieve harmony between our individual uniqueness—with all our personal needs, desires, beliefs, and values--and how we relate to others—with all the attendant expectations and demands. A life of integrity is a life of openness, not defensiveness; it is a life of humility and compassion, not arrogance and self-importance. This is a high bar, a stretch aspiration; but it is also the only responsible standard we should desire.

Serve With integrity. Many cynics may suggest that such a lofty goal is anachronistic in today’s social and political culture. Get all you can; never compromise; if you don’t put yourself first, no one else will; the weak deserve what they get; only the strong survive.

I’m not a cynic. On the contrary, I believe that what we are hearing today is a yearning for selfless service and integrity in the public sphere. Certainly, the challenges we face today will be with us when you assume the leadership of society. These challenges cry out for a commitment to service of others with integrity: solving income inequality; insuring environmental sustainability; balancing security with personal freedom; educating the next generation to thrive in a more interdependent and diverse world; nurturing innovation to build a brighter future for all while caring for the less fortunate; building a more perfect union where everyone counts; realizing our national motto: out of many...one.

The Class of 1970 is proud to serve you, West Point, and the country by sponsoring the National Conference of Ethics in America. Those members of the class who are with you this week look forward to learning with you. With you, we are eager to be inspired by our speakers and transformed by your thoughtful conversations over the next two days. Our sincere hope is that the conversation will continue after the conference and that your lives going forward will be even more focused on service and integrity.

SWI.

