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Elliot Richardson Prize Event
Acceptance Remarks**

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**Remarks By
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**Building Bridges:
The Rewarding Life of Public Service**

*An old man, going a lone highway
Came at the evening, cold and gray
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.*

*“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way;
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide—
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?”*

*The builder lifted his old gray head.
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”*

*By Will Allen Dromgoole
The Bridge Builder*

If I may, I would like to take a few moments this afternoon to talk about building bridges.

Building bridges through public service

Of all of the reasons that I am honored to receive this touching recognition today, the greatest is that it puts me in the company of some truly remarkable individuals who dedicated their lives to building bridges for the future of our country. Elliot Richardson, for whom this prize is named, knew that ours is a nation built on pride in sacrifice and commitment to shared values—on a willingness of its citizens to give of their time and energy for the good of the whole. He knew that there is no greater contribution than a life of dedication to public service. Indeed, for all of the good that can be done by citizens who volunteer, or become involved in political affairs in other ways, the simple truth is that our nation needs hardworking, innovative, dedicated people to devote their working lives to its operation and improvement. We are the nation that we are today because those bridge builders of the past gave of themselves in a way that really mattered.

My own career in public service was born of necessity. After graduating near the top of my class at Stanford Law School, I was unable to obtain a position at any national law firm, except as a legal secretary. But the gender walls that blocked me out of the private sector could more easily be hurdled in the public sector, and I soon found employment as the deputy county attorney of San Mateo County, California. Although brought to the position by something short of choice, I came to realize almost immediately

what a wonderful path I had taken. I was having a better time at my job than were those of my peers who had opted for private practice. Life as a public servant was more interesting. The work was more challenging. The encouragement and guidance from good mentors was more genuine. And the opportunities to take initiative and to see real results were more frequent. Ultimately, this foray into the exciting arena of public service led me to the privilege of serving as an assistant attorney general in my state, a State senator, a State judge, and a United States Supreme Court Justice. At every step of the way, I felt the thrill of doing something right for a reason that was good. It was the thrill of building bridges.

To be sure, the work of bridge-building can be as taxing as it is rewarding. These efforts can call for sacrifice—sometimes emotional, sometimes financial, sometimes personal. Those who choose the life of public service open themselves to public review. There’s a wonderful little story told about Herbert Hoover, who became quite discouraged when his attempts to promote economic recovery during the Great Depression seemed to be making little headway. Hoover expressed his discouragement to former president Calvin Coolidge, noting that he was particularly disturbed that, in spite of all of his efforts, his critics were becoming ever more vocal and belligerent. Coolidge comforted Hoover: “You can’t expect to see calves running in the field the day after you put the bull to the cows,” he told him. “No,” Hoover replied. “But I would at least expect to see contented cows.”

Sometimes, I'm sorry to report, the nation that we aim to serve is not content with our efforts. But the ever-present understanding that you are a part of something bigger than yourself, and that your efforts are paving the way for those who will follow, makes a life of public service worth the bumps along the way. We cannot expect that a single generation of public servants will be able bridge the gaps of inequality and injustice, or cross the chasms of our nation's other critical needs. But as we focus our energies on sharing ideas, finding solutions, and using what is right with America to remedy what is wrong with it, we *can* make a difference. I am confident that our decisions to devote our professional selves to the good of the nation will not go unnoticed by those who travel the highway behind us.

Building a bridge to future generations of public servants

Let me turn now to one of the most important bridges that those of us who are dedicated to public service can build. This is the bridge that connects our cause to those generations that must take up the task of keeping the public sector vibrant when our work in it is done. Our country has never needed more qualified people in public service than it does today; yet many of the country's young people are choosing other paths. This bridge will not build itself. It will take action on our parts. Our nation can do a better job of harnessing its brainpower. Young people need our guidance if they are to find their way into lives of public service. I submit that there are some things that we need to *tell* them, some things that we need to *ask* them, and some things with which we need to *help* them.

Tell them

We need to *tell* them how truly rewarding it is to live the life of a public servant—what a high and honorable calling it is. We need to convey to those young people who have real hopes of changing lives and influencing the nation for the better that there is immense satisfaction to be found in making a genuine contribution to your community by working for its government. They need to know that there is no purpose nobler than public service and no joy greater than that found in serving others. There is a sad but common misconception in our society that time and energy contributed to others is time and energy lost. We can do much to dispel this notion, helping our children and grandchildren see that we may give without losing, and that it is often in giving that we gain. We need to tell them that public service will increase their self-worth—even if not their net worth.

We need to tell them that the work is exciting—not only as a chance to add another dimension to the vitality and decency of our democracy, but also as a mechanism for individual growth. Public service can mark a life with meaning and can open doors to opportunities that would otherwise be unimaginable. We need to tell our young people that they can and should be participants, rather than spectators, in our nation’s business. We need to tell them that the aspects of our government that stand in need of fixing will only be fixed if they are willing to join us in the effort. In the words of Plato, one of the penalties for refusing to participate in government “is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.”

In some respects, our task is much more fundamental than that of convincing bright young college graduates to work for the government instead of the private sector. It is the task of curing a growing detachment of young people from the civil society and the body politic. Before we can instill in them the virtues of public service, we need to invigorate in them an even more basic civic education—one that fosters a sense of community and a willingness to serve. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, our youth need to “aspire to be public citizen[s],” with a sense of shared responsibility for the society in which we live. We’ve seen some alarming statistics suggesting both a mistrust of government by the young, and a decline in voting among the population in general—all pointing to a potential crisis of confidence in the value of public life in our democracy. If our bridge to the future is to be sturdy enough to support a forthcoming generation of public servants, it will have to be built on a foundation of engaged citizenry and appreciation for the value of community. To that end, we need to tell our nation’s youth that our collective existence as a society transcends the sum of our narrow, individual interests, and then we need to demonstrate by our actions how individual participation can make a difference. We need to help them see that their government is not a distant and unresponsive institution, but a Partnership of the People that desperately needs what they have to give. It is time for us to tell America’s talented next generation why we’re glad that we made the choice we did.

Ask them

Next, we need to *ask* America's rising generation to consider a life of public service themselves. I am convinced that many fail to pursue this path, not because they are apathetic or selfish, but merely because they are poorly informed about the magnitude of the need for their help. As the author of the study that you released today noted, President Kennedy's challenge to "ask not what your country can do for you [but] ask what you can do for your country" is as important today as it was when first issued more than 40 years ago. It is our duty as the bridge builders of today to reissue this challenge to those who will follow us. We need to ask them to consider the ways that their skills might be utilized and rewarded in the public sector. The research tells us that Americans who want to contribute to their society and make a difference in their working lives often turn to the non-profit sector rather than the public sector. We need to ask them to use their energy and ideas to invigorate our society as public servants. There is no reason that the private and non-profit sectors should have a corner on the talent market. But to recruit and retain its fair share of the best talent, public service must be a visible option. Its guiding principles must be conveyed to the labor force that it seeks to woo. For the American experiment in self-government to remain vital, someone needs to pose the question to those who might not have heard it.

Those of us in positions of somewhat greater visibility should do our part, asking and encouraging young Americans to consider public service. And those closest to young people are in an even better position to guide their career decisions in a personal way. Parents, local governmental leaders, and

community members—especially those who have themselves opted for careers in the public sector—should be passing along this message, as well. They can do much to influence the choices young people make and the options that they see as viable. Teachers, in particular, have a critical role to play here. Eleanor Roosevelt once said that we must “begin young to teach the standards that should prevail in public servants” and help our children draw “the logical conclusion that the ends cannot be achieved without the cooperation of every citizen.” That remains the mandate of teachers everywhere today—to instill in our littlest citizens a sense of ownership in their government, so that they will answer the call to public service when it comes.

Help them

Lastly, in addition to all of this telling and asking, we need to do some helping. If we are serious about building bridges through public service, we will take a good, hard look at the barriers that are keeping our nation’s best and brightest from joining our ranks.

The sad truth is that many of the sharpest young minds in this country are saddled with overwhelming educational debts that make it difficult to embrace lower-paying public service jobs. The typical undergraduate debt burden is estimated to be between \$14,000 and \$16,000. The average law student graduates with more than \$80,000 in debt. We can hardly blame them for making choices that are guided by their pocketbooks. We need to think more intently about how we can make public service feasible for the people that our country needs to have in its employ. In some instances, the answer simply

has to be in the form of salary increases. For example, the salaries of federal judges have reached such levels of inadequacy that it threatens impairment of ability to recruit the most qualified judges to the judicial branch. In other instances, loan repayment or deferral programs may serve the purposes of encouraging new graduates to give their fresh energy to the public sector. In still other instances, a little creativity and forward-thinking may produce equally effective ways to help those who genuinely want to help their nation. Bridge-building of this sort takes both ingenuity and imagination. Elliot Richardson himself reminded us that “imagination is the only tool we have with which we can rise beyond reality, beyond the reach of our own immediate perception.” His dream was that we would “get beyond the present and foresee issues of the future that need to be prepared for now.” Those of us who share that dream must throw our whole support behind efforts to share the excitement and joy of public service with the public servants of tomorrow.

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In closing, let me again express my sincere gratitude for the honor you have bestowed upon me. I certainly treasure it. And let me express my gratitude, as well, for those valiant public servants who built the bridges that made possible the many opportunities that I have enjoyed. I give to you my continued commitment to energizing our nation’s youth, and my promise that I will continue *telling* them of privilege that is public service, *asking* them to unite in this effort, and *helping* them make their visions a reality. I ask you to join me in this noble endeavor, that we might preserve the dignity and strength

of this unique government—a government that is, in every sense, by the people, for the people and of the people. Our country needs us, and future generations of Americans are counting on us to keep the spirit of public service alive. They, too, “must cross in the twilight dim. Good friends, we are building the bridge for [them].”