



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
Office of Public Affairs Telephone: 301/415-8200
Washington, D.C. 20555-0001
E-mail: opa.resource@nrc.gov
Site: <http://www.nrc.gov>

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**2010 Federal Engineer of the Year Award
Ceremony and Lunch
Prepared Comments by
NRC Commissioner Dale E. Klein
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Thank you. I am very pleased to be here, and honored to be asked to deliver the keynote address.

I want to begin by acknowledging the National Society of Professional Engineers. The work you do in promoting ethical conduct and high professional standards, encouraging young people, providing opportunities for continuing education, and offering a network to exchange information and best practices, is extremely valuable, and I commend the leadership of the NSPE.

I want to congratulate all the award finalists, and if you will permit me, let me congratulate the NRC finalist, Dr. Nilesh Chokshi. Dr. Chokshi is the Deputy Director for our Division of Site and Environmental Reviews in the Office of New Reactors. This is one of the busiest and most challenging organizations in NRC and we are proud to have skilled and talented people like Dr. Chokshi as part of our team.

I noticed that some of the finalists are civilian employees at the Department of Defense, and several are military officers. Prior to joining the NRC, I was Assistant to the Secretary at the Department of Defense. Whatever your political opinions, I think we can all agree that our men and women in uniform are highly dedicated, and their service to our country is something we can all admire. Speaking for myself, I was very proud when I was at the Pentagon to serve alongside so many people who embodied the unofficial motto of the Air Force: "Service before self."

That subject of "service" – and what it means for us as engineers – is the theme of my remarks today. I imagine a few people in this room will nod their heads in agreement when I say that, in my opinion, engineering is a noble calling. One of the most prominent engineers in American history phrased it very nicely. Quote:

“Engineering is a great profession. There is the fascination of watching a figment of the imagination emerge through the aid of science to a plan on paper. Then it moves to realization in stone or metal or energy. Then it brings homes to men and women. Then it elevates the standard of living and adds to the comforts of life. This is the engineer's high privilege.”

That was said by Herbert Hoover, the only professional engineer to serve as President of the United States... and of course, the man who was primarily responsible for building the Hoover Dam. I agree with Hoover that engineering is a high privilege; and engineers do play a vital role in elevating the standard of living and adding to the comforts of life. I also agree with Hoover's decision to bring his experience and expertise in engineering to public service in the federal government.

That is a decision many of us here today have made. In fact, the point of this awards banquet is precisely to honor engineers who have made this commitment to federal public service. I want to say a few words about that.

As mentioned in my introduction, I serve on the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The NRC does not just regulate nuclear power plants, we also oversee the safe use of radioactive materials used in fields like agriculture and nuclear medicine. You have all heard of procedures like CAT scans and MRIs, but another technology in nuclear medicine is something called the Gamma Knife, which can help treat tumors.

One of the people who benefitted from this technology was my late friend Edward J. McGaffigan. Ed was the longest-serving Commissioner in the history of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission... until he finally succumbed to cancer in 2007. Many of you probably never heard of him, but I was proud to know Ed McGaffigan. He was the model of a dedicated public servant. Ed was first moved to devote his life to public service by John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's challenge to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country” resonated very strongly with Ed.

Ed and I would often meet with and speak to the new employees coming into the agency, and we both agreed that these recent graduates tended to be extremely bright, devoted, and hard-working. But they struck us both as a bit more worldly, and even a touch cynical, compared to how we were at that age.

Some healthy skepticism is a good thing... but these days it seems a little too easy to be cynical, especially for young people. I consider myself a practical person – a realist. You all know the difference, right? A cynic believes the world gets worse every day. An optimist believes the world gets better every day. The realist, as the pundit Frank McKinney Hubbard noted, thinks that “The world gets better every day – but then a little worse in the evening.”

So I hope you will be skeptics, which means recognizing that our country is neither hopeless nor perfect. Like most of us, it's pretty good, but could stand some improvement. And the best way to improve the country is to get involved and do something about it. This is why I am so proud to be here today with all of you to honor engineers who have made the commitment to public service.

I quoted Herbert Hoover earlier, about how a good engineer can make a lasting contribution to the public good. But a good engineer and a good public servant means more than just technical skill. Let me repeat something my friend Ed McGaffigan said, about a year before he died. Ed spoke these words to some young incoming employees to the NRC. But they apply equally well to anyone considering public service in general... or for that matter, life in general:

“If you conduct yourself with honor, with integrity, and with diligence, you will have a great career. ‘Honor’ often involves telling people, perhaps colleagues, perhaps supervisors, what they do not want to hear. I have throughout my career let the facts determine my position on issues. That can upset ideologues and theorists of all persuasions who do not let facts get in the way of their ideologies or their theories. And it may make you enemies. You can afford such enemies, but you can not afford to compromise your honor, your personal compass.”

These are the qualities we must all strive for. In part, because we owe it to ourselves as professionals. But also because whether or not we do our jobs well, and set high standards for ourselves, can have very far-reaching consequences.

There are probably several of you in this room today who are members of the Order of the Engineer and proudly wear the steel ring that symbolizes your commitment. This ring is to be worn on the small finger of your working hand, as a reminder of your everyday ethical and moral responsibilities. I am reminded of a particular phrase from the oath for the Order of the Engineer, “Were it not for this heritage of accumulated experience, my efforts would be feeble.”

To the senior leadership in this room I want to say that it seems to me all of us need to do two things to maintain that heritage and a high level of engineering excellence in federal service. First, we need to support the institutions that “feed” future engineering needs – especially schools and engineering societies. An old Chinese proverb says: “If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.” I am a professor and will soon be returning to academia in Texas. I plan to make strengthening the connection between academia and public service one of my goals. But even those of you not in academia can help encourage the next generation by supporting engineering societies, such as this one... and by sponsoring and mentoring young people.

The second thing we can do is to promote high engineering standards in the government by providing personal examples of excellence in our own behavior and conduct. We can work on cultivating the qualities that Ed talked about and exemplified: honor, a unwavering devotion to the truth, and a willingness to do the right thing, even when the price seems high. By cultivating these qualities, we can show by example that federal service attracts the very best. I think that engineers contemplating public service want to know that their efforts will be recognized for its contributions to society. But they also want challenging and interesting work, and to know that they can grow and develop, both professionally and personally, in their careers.

And that brings me back to why we are all here today – to honor the excellence of engineers in the federal government. So, let me close by once again congratulating this year’s winner of the Engineer of the Year Award, and all the finalists who have done so much to make us proud to be public servants, and as engineers.