



The following is an excerpt from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' speech at the 2010 National Scout Jamboree at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., on July 28.

Fifty-two years ago, when I received my Eagle, I was like many of you here today. I was 15 years old, attending high school. I wasn't a straight "A" student, nor was I a particularly good athlete. Although I was involved in school activities, I wasn't really a student leader. This was all true in college as well. And when I went to Washington, D.C., to begin working for the CIA at age 22, I could fit everything I owned into the back seat of my car. I had no connections and I didn't know a soul.

The only thing I had done in my life to that point that led me to think I could make a difference, that I could be a leader, was to earn my Eagle Scout Badge. It was the only thing I had done that distinguished me from so many other high-school kids. It was the first thing I had done that told me I might be different because I had worked harder, was more determined, more goal-oriented, more persistent than most others. Earning my Eagle gave me the self-confidence to believe, for the first time in my life, that I could achieve whatever I set my mind to.

I suspect that for many of you Scouts here today, earning your Scout ranks – up to and including the Eagle – this likely is the first thing you will have done on your own that marks you as someone special, someone with unique qualities of mind and heart. Like so many Scouts before you, some of you will become captains of

industry, important businessmen. Others will be builders and engineers. Some may cure diseases. Some may design revolutionary software, be an astronaut. Some of you may become generals or admirals. You may even head the CIA or be the secretary of defense or president of a great university. But for most of you, your Scouting experience is the first major step toward the most important goal of all: becoming a good man, a man of integrity and decency, a man of moral courage, a man unafraid of hard work, a man of strong character – the kind of person who built this country and made it into the greatest democracy and the greatest economic powerhouse in the history of the world. A Scout is marked for life as an example of what a boy and man can be and should be. You are a role model.

The fate of our nation in the years to come and, I believe, the future of the world itself, depends on the kind of people we modern Americans will prove to be – and, above all, the kind of citizens our young people will be.

I believe that today, as for the past 100 years, there is no finer program for preparing American boys for citizenship and leadership than Boy Scouts of America. I have served eight presidents. I have traveled the world and had many extraordinary experiences. I have met many remarkable people. But I can tell you that my Scouting experiences, Scoutmasters, camping trips, Philmont adventures, the 1957 National Jamboree at Valley Forge and many more had a huge influence in shaping my life.

Today, more than 50 years after I was a Scout, I can remember the names and faces of all my Scoutmasters and many of the other adult volunteers. I remember 60-year-old Oscar Lamb taking 10 of us teenagers to Philmont and hiking every blistered step with us. I remember Forrest Beckett teaching us kids in Kansas how to cook in winter on a fire of dried cow chips, imparting a distinctive flavor to already nearly inedible food. They and a handful of other volunteers along with my father – my role models as a boy – taught me about the Scout oath and law, about teamwork, about real courage, and about leadership.

Much has changed in the 50 years since I was a Scout – not all of it for the better, especially for kids. One thing, however, that has remained the same is the positive influence of Scouting on boys and young men, and the ability of so many of you to surprise and inspire us with your determination, your character, your skills, and your moral and physical courage.

There are in too many places too few people with Scouting values, people who say, "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty" – and mean it. From Wall Street to Washington to our hometowns, in all our lives there are people who seek after riches or the many kinds of power without regard to what is right or true or decent. And yet, you here today, and millions of other parents, community leaders, boys and Scout leaders demonstrate daily that Scouting offers an alternative: that a life based on principles, on personal integrity and honor – on Scouting values – can be exciting, adventurous, fulfilling and uplifting for an individual, for a community and for a nation.

I am here today because I believe in the extraordinary power of Scouting to be a force for good in a community and in the lives of its boys and young men. I share with you a vision of a community of involved, committed adults who provide a chance for every boy to have friends his own age with whom he can camp and learn and laugh, led by caring adults who set an example not just of skills, but of character, of the joy of service and the joy of life – adults who are leaders and who teach boys to be leaders.

As I look out at all of you, I see the legacy of Scouting: a new generation of worthy leaders for America in the 21st century. You, and millions of other young men and boys, will be strong leaders thanks to Scouting. Strong leaders of character, of faith, of skill – courageous defenders of the weak and the helpless, believers in the brotherhood of man. And with leaders such as you, America will continue to be the beacon of hope and decency and justice for the rest of the world.