

**U.S. Coast Guard Academy
Institute for Leadership**

presents

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Leadership Speaker Series*

Dr. Michael Ignatieff

**Director, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
at
Harvard University's
John F. Kennedy School of Government**

**U. S. Coast Guard Academy
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Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated. Good evening Admiral and Mrs. Van Sice, Captain and Mrs. Thomas, faculty, staff, distinguished guests, officer candidates, Corps of Cadets. Professor Michael Ignatieff's address is the second event in the 2005-2006 academic year's Leadership Speaker's Series and is sponsored by the Coast Guard Academy's Institute for Leadership. Professor Ignatieff is an internationally recognized and award winning writer, scholar, and broadcaster who has a bachelor's in arts in history with first honors from the University of Toronto, his PhD in history from Harvard University and his Masters in Arts from Cambridge University in England. Professor Ignatieff has won such prestigious awards and prizes such as the Governor General's Award for Nonfiction, the Cornelius Ryan award of the Overseas Press Club on New York, and the Lionel Gelber Prize for Writing about Foreign Affairs. Dr. Michael Ignatieff is currently the professor and director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Ladies and gentleman, Professor Michael Ignatieff.

PROFESSOR IGANTIEFF: It's a great honor to be here and if you could see what you look like looking back at me, you'd realize just how scared I really am. You're a very terrifying sight. {Laughter.} I'll do my best to keep my alarm to myself.

I want to thank Admiral Van Sice, I want to thank Cadet Baxa, I want to thank the Institute for Leadership. I want to say what a privilege it is to speak to the faculty and staff and Corps of Cadets and I want to make one friend of mine's ears burn—and that's to say an affectionate word about a former student of mine who teaches at this academy, John Dettleff, who made it all possible. It's terribly embarrassing for a teacher to talk about a former student who now teaches you but he was one heck of a student. I was

going to come here and talk to you about human rights and international politics and then history and fate walked in ten days ago, or whatever it was, and seized us all by the scruff of the neck and thrust us into a new world—and the new world is called Katrina. I wanted to talk about disaster and the public service, and I wanted to talk about it because Katrina and its aftermath is at the center of your mandate as young people going into a service that has the confidence of the American people. I wanted to share with you in a very raw form, a very direct form this civilian's view of some of the challenges—some of the moral and ethical challenges that arise from the Katrina story, that is still unfolding.

This is the largest natural disaster in US history, but it's not just the loss of life and the scale of devastation that's shaken the country. The most troubling aspect has been the failure of anticipation and the failure of response by almost all levels of government: municipal, state and, perhaps especially, federal. There's one exception and you know what that exception was—one part of the government of the United States did not fail its people and that was the United States Coast Guard. As of Tuesday, your crews had rescued 23,400 people and evacuated an additional 9,400 patients and medical personnel. So as a civilian who I hope will never have need of your services—but I am extremely glad to think that you might be there if I do need you—I want to salute you and thank you and say that you did something very important. The brave crews who flew those missions did more than simply safeguard the honor of your service; you did something to repair the honor of your government and that's a very, very important accomplishment. But the disaster raises tough questions about what a democracy is, what the duty of care that government has towards citizens, and the duty of care that each citizen has to other citizens.

It was one of these moments that laid bare the bare bones, the skeletal structure of our society, and I want to review some of the facts about what failed—the failures of anticipation, the failures of response—and think with you, because it's still unfolding, about what these failures tell us about the duty of care that public servants like you owe to your fellow citizens in a time of disaster.

I'm no expert, I'm stepping out of my field. So you should feel free to walk out into the night saying, "That's one civilian who doesn't know what he's talking about." I'm only as good as what I read and think and know and years of experience in other fields. But I hope things I can say will be helpful to this audience.

I want to talk about three specific areas of failure. One is the levees, the other was the evacuation plan, and the third is the recovery plan. And then draw out from that some more general reflections about government, about public service and about the duty of care that we owe to our fellow citizens.

Let me talk a little bit about the levees. I don't know the whole story, I may have some of the facts wrong, but I think I got most of it. The levees that broke were maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers and they were paid for by the federal government. And there is evidence that the levee system was incomplete and the people knew that the system was incomplete and the evidence and knowledge of that simple fact was not acted upon. This

is not a disaster that came out of the blue. In fact, there was an emergency disaster planning scenario in July of '04 which imagined a hurricane of this strength and gamed out what the consequences would be. This was a catastrophe that people had in plain sight before it happened. There's evidence that the levee could not stand a hurricane of Katrina's size and the knowledge of that was not acted upon. All of that is well known. What I want to focus on is, "What do we do about it now"?

And I want to contrast two ways of thinking about how we might face the question of rebuilding those levees. I want to contrast an actuarial way of thinking and a moral way of thinking about the task ahead. An actuarial way of thinking is to calculate the likelihood that this catastrophe will happen again and then build on the basis of an actuarial calculation of risk. A moral way of thinking about this is to say, "What is it we're trying to protect here"? We're trying to protect human life, but the thing that the Katrina disaster has shown us is we're protecting more than human life here—we're protecting the faith and confidence and trust of the American people in their institutions. The levee is a metaphor for the confidence and faith and trust we have in the capacity of government to protect us. So if you think about a levee in that way, you don't think about it in an actuarial way. That is, you don't think, "We'll build it to the standard that will meet almost all contingencies and since catastrophe is very unlikely, we don't have to build a catastrophe standard." If the moral test of the levee is: it has to protect real human lives, but that it also has to protect the full faith and confidence that we have in the institutions of government itself, then, frankly, we have to spend what it takes. We have to build a levee system that is at the highest conceivable, possible engineering standard we can in this case, because something so vital is at stake that we simply have to do it.

And other societies have made that kind of judgment, a moral judgment as opposed to an actuarial judgment. If you go to the East End of London, you see a Thames barrier; the Thames barrier is built to control floods. I vividly remember when the Thames barrier was built and almost every Londoner said, "What the heck are we spending this money on? The chances of a flood are very low." Well, now we know what happens when you build to an actuarial calculation of risk. We simply have to rethink this. There are things that are so important that we have to spend what it costs to get it right. That's the contrast, it seems to me, between actuarial reasoning and moral reasoning.

Let me look at a second area. I've talked about the levees; now let me talk about a little bit about the evacuation plan. The evacuation plan for New Orleans, as I understand it, and please correct me if I've got the facts wrong, assumed that people would leave by private car. Assumption number one. And assumption number two—that people, when they left, would be basically housed by their family and domestic networks. Both assumptions turned out to be flawed.

The assumptions were correct for seventy percent of the population or eighty percent of the population but not correct for twenty percent of the population, and we know what percentage of the population it wasn't true for. It was not true for people who can't drive. It was not true for people without extensive family networks out of state. It was not true for people without the resources to rent cars. It was not true for very large numbers of

human beings. And this seems to me to have highlighted a failure in our duty to care for our fellow citizens that is very striking. We simply didn't think carefully enough about the facts of race and class in the United States. It's that simple. And the planning should have thought through the simple fact, which we saw on our television screens when it happened: desperate mothers saying, "How could I get out of this city? I don't have a drivers' license. I can't drive."

A duty of care involves social knowledge—social knowledge about the facts of race and class, however unpleasant they may be in our society, and a willingness to create an evacuation plan that deals with a society that actually exists, as opposed to the society you wish existed. Now, then the question is, "Whose responsibility is it to evacuate a city"?

I think in that evacuation plan, there was an assumption that the duty of care was on the individuals involved, but if the individuals involved don't have the means to evacuate, it seems to me axiomatic that the duty of care falls on government. If the individuals can't do it, if they haven't got the resources, then the government has to step in. Otherwise, they die, that's how it works. But I'm not sure the evacuation plan clearly understood the sense in which it was a governmental duty of care to provide buses for example that would evacuate literally everybody and go from door to door and get everybody out. And let's be clear what this duty of care is. I'm not saying, and nobody in their right mind would say, that government's duty is to fix all the social, racial, or economic inequalities in American society. It's either not possible or not desirable, but it must protect the vulnerable against natural disasters if they have no capacity to help themselves. And once this is over, and I hope the Coast Guard will be actively involved in this planning, we need a prioritization of disaster scenarios and an evacuation plan for all Americans, all Americans, that understands the dynamics of class and racial exclusion and consciously plans to evacuate those who cannot evacuate themselves.

The third element here is the recovery plan: state, municipal and federal governments will be tasked with assisting and this is a simple fact that is beginning to drop into our consciousness, like a stone into a pond with huge ripples: this is the largest group of internally displaced people in the United States since the Civil War. This is a really big job—it's not a job that's going to be over in 2 weeks. We're beginning to be aware it's a job that may take years, and the responsibility will persist until people can return to a dry, safe, and economically viable New Orleans, and when I say a dry, safe, and economically viable New Orleans, you begin to realize the enormity of the task that this country faces. And the point here is very simple: charity and voluntarism can help, but legal responsibility has to be with government because only government has the capacity to coordinate this massive enterprise.

The issue here is not generosity. At the moment, I think we're being moved and we should be moved, by the extraordinary outpouring of generosity of our fellow citizens. Last night, on the television, the donation record had got up to five hundred and sixty million dollars in less than a week from ordinary individuals phoning in their donations. It's a heartening and wonderful response. But you can't rebuild the lives of pretty well a

million people on the basis of private generosity alone. We have to have a plan that houses returns, and reintegrates 500,000 people, at least, and who else can do that but government? And there's another point here that's more party political, more partisan, and I'm not here to make partisan remarks. To fund this through more deficit spending is simply to pass the burden onto our children. Taxes will probably have to rise; the penalty for this failure has to be paid for by this generation. That's a very important piece of political reckoning that we're going to have to come to here—who pays the bill?

Tonight as I was preparing the last bit of this talk, I noticed that the Senate had passed a \$50 billion appropriation for this—who's going to pay for it? Are we in the dreamland of assuming we just add this to the deficit indefinitely? This is a time where we have to look fairly and squarely at the household finances and ask ourselves how we're going to pay for this. This seems to be a very important burden of sacrifice that has to be taken because we're fooling ourselves if we think that sacrifice will not be involved in helping these people back onto their feet.

Let me stand back from those three basic points about the levee, evacuation plan, and recovery plan and think a little bit about what this tells us about the role of government, and I think you can already tell where I'm heading. One of the things that's interesting about this catastrophe is that, as you know, one of the simplest ways to think about the debates of American politics is that it's essentially a debate about one thing, and has been since Franklin Roosevelt: that is, it's a debate about what forces beyond an individual's control a government is obliged to protect its people against—that's the central question of American politics to me. From Roosevelt onwards, the government has moved to protect more people against the kinds of bad luck, misfortune, and fate that ruin individual lives. So we have Social Security, unemployment insurance, bankruptcy protection—as examples of this attempt to go in and create structures under individual lives so people don't face disaster alone.

In the last 30 or 40 years, there's been a movement against the idea that government is always the solution, and a dawning awareness that sometimes government is part of the problem. This is very noticeable in the Reagan achievement, the Reagan presidency, but the interesting thing here, and this is important, is that even those who believe that government is the problem because of its size, intrusiveness and its inefficiency have never denied that government should try to protect people from natural disasters. And this is why the cry that went up from that convention center on that Thursday night—and anybody who saw the footage will never forget—the cry that went up from that convention center, was so devastating because ordinary Americans were saying, "Where is our government?" This was beyond politics—"Where is our government? Where is the consensus that government is there to protect us from natural fate and come to our rescue when we're in trouble?" And that cry was not answered, and was not answered swiftly. These people did not receive assistance for five, six, sometimes seven days.

So for many Americans— this again is not a party political point I'm making here—but in four terrible years, when you look back, we're going to have the September 11th anniversary very soon—there are many Americans who feel that the government has

failed the American people twice, failed to protect it from foreign enemies and from domestic disaster. In one case, 9/11, the government is saying that basically we couldn't have known and basically Americans have believed them about 9/11. The open question is whether they will believe the government over Katrina. That is, "Could you have known"? I think many Americans will begin to say, "Yes, you could have known." So, then the question becomes, "How do you attribute responsibility for failure"? This is a very big issue in all uniform services. You're driving boats. If you make a mistake, you have to pay consequences: the discipline, the esprit de corps, the whole raison d'être of your corps depends on attributing responsibility for failure. In civilian life, unfortunately, failure is often not attributed; it's just shuffled around and passed along.

But there's no doubt that heads have to roll here, there's no doubt that politically, consequences have to follow for those who held command responsibility here. I just make one point here: the systems that American government has for attributing responsibility inevitably politicize the attribution of responsibility. There are good things about that: heads should roll—I'm not saying which heads—but I'm saying heads should roll. But there's a cost to politicizing the attribution of responsibility and the cost is this: the problems with those levees, the problems with flood management, the problems with the whole management of the Louisiana delta—and here I really do step beyond my area of expertise, I freely grant—but the problems connected with the management of the Mississippi flow, the management of the whole Louisiana basin, the whole ecological environmental management that goes back seventy, eighty years. There are some analysts who say we're paying the price here for public policy mistakes in the management of this that go back to 1928, to the time of Hoover and Coolidge. I'm not saying who's right and who's wrong here, but in our search for responsibility, let's get this right.

If there's something fundamentally about the environmental engineering of the levee system and the flood control management and the storm protection systems that human engineering does not understand how the environment works here, we have got to get that right, in the focus on narrowly attributing political responsibility, we may miss the larger picture here, which is we need very good environmental science, marine science, the stuff you study here in school. We need to get this harnessed on this problem, and if we think the responsibility ends simply by cashing a few obvious heads that the media can identify and throw out, we're missing a huge opportunity to get the management of our huge waterway and a huge area of our coastline right—and this is right in the center of your terms of reference as a service—and I hope your voice will be raised to widen the area of finding out how to do this better by thinking through the history of our management of this problem for the last seventy or eighty years, and not for the last four years or eight years or twelve years.

Ok, let me pull back still further and raise an even more fundamental question: Katrina was one of those moments where we saw the ties that bind the country together put under tremendous strain, the ties that bind were frayed by what happened in Katrina. One of the cries that went up from the people trapped in the convention center in New Orleans was very significant and I'll never forget seeing the woman who said this: she said, "We are American citizens, we are American citizens, we are not refugees, we are not stateless

objects of your charity, we are citizens of this republic, we have rights here and our rights have been denied.” Ok, for that woman and for thousands of people who went through the experience of the last five or six days, the thing that was so shocking was that their citizenship counted so little.

That, it seems to me, is a tremendously important lesson, a very important lesson for you, as young professionals in a uniformed service. The tie that binds a society that is divided by race, divided by class, divided by religion, and divided by politics--the tie that binds us is common citizenship. And government matters because government programs that protect people, like the Coast Guard, convert citizenship from this kind of high minded abstraction into something very real, something that saves people’s lives. When those Coast Guard helicopters are overhead lifting people off, you’re not just saving lives, you’re giving an instance of what citizenship means to an American: that your service will come to their assistance and help them. So, the symbolic importance of what you’re doing cannot be overstated. But these ties of citizenship are legitimate and accepted as binding only if citizenship confers equal rights regardless of race and social class. An evacuation plan that did not provide public evacuation for the poorest clearly failed the test of the equality of American citizenship.

This is less obvious than it seems. Americans live with inequality all the time. If you’re poor and black, you live in a very unequal and very unfair world. You don’t need to be told how unfair and unequal it is. But there are some inequalities in this society that are absolutely unbearable and that is inequality of citizenship. When Los Angeles went up during the Rodney King riots, it went up because it was such a flagrant demonstration of the inequality of the law and therefore the inequality of citizenship. People who could endure the inequality of fortune, the inequality of their situation, the inequality of their life, found the inequality of being treated like garbage by law officers unsupportable and unbearable. And something of the same happened in New Orleans: people used to inequality, people used to unfairness said, “You have forgotten that we’re Americans, you can’t do that to us.” This simple thought about inequality is terribly important and we tend to forget it in the work that you do but can you imagine what would have happened if those Coast Guard helicopters had decided to pluck rich people off of roofs, or white people off roofs, and not poor people off roofs? It would never have occurred to anybody in your service to do so, because one of the unstated premises of everything you do is you provide service on the basis of equality to all of those in need. It’s very important to remember simple basics like that, because the whole show of American citizenship, believe me, depends on the reliability day in and day out of equality to all citizens.

Now, I put tremendous emphasis on the importance of government here because there are people who say: “Well, government failed, but good people, charitable and responsible, can step in and fill the gap that government can’t fill.” There has been an outpouring of generosity, some of it guilty--but who cares whether it’s guilty or not, if the food, shoes, and toys get to the people and the schools get opened, who cares how it happened. My basic view of this is that one of the hard facts about American life is that there is very weak social tissue, very weak neighborly connection between many white folks and many black folks. That is just the fact. I wish it were different but it is not. If that is a

fact, and I may be wrong, that redoubles the importance of government and government institutions as a mediator between social and racial groups. That makes it more important that you deliver equally to all people. It makes it more important that government serves all people equally because if the social tissue is weak, you really are the bottom line that keeps it together.

So the job we face is too big for our generous hearts. We need good institutions that work, and that seems to me that is one of the things that the Coast Guard proved last week: you are a good institution. You did your job. We need all government institutions to do their job that way. Let me conclude, and I really am concluding with very three simple lessons I take from this story.

The first is, it's so obvious but I'll just say it again: plan for the worst; do not hope for the best. One of the ironies of and traps of the American character is the immense optimism of the American people. It means that Americans constantly expect the best but it leaves Americans often blindsided by tragedy. Life is tragic, storms are vicious, people die. Good public policy has to be informed by a very strong sense of tragedy. Bad things happen. It's very hard for a fundamentally optimistic country, a country that is always looking for the bright sunlight, to look squarely at the clouds and the rain, but you have to if you're going to plan, if you're going to prevent disaster and tragedy. Plan for the worst; do not hope for the best.

My point earlier contrasting moral thinking and actuarial thinking was simply to say something obvious: let me say it in simpler words. Some things are priceless; some things are worth whatever you have to pay for them. I don't just mean the individual lives, the poor people in New Orleans who lost their lives. Even more priceless is the idea anchored in America that all lives are worth the same, so that if that's a priceless idea-- and it is-- we need to make the levees as strong as they need to be whatever it costs. We need to get the evacuation plan right whatever it costs. We need to get this thing fixed and those people back whatever it costs. It's just that important because what's at stake here is, "are we a country of equals"?

The third point here is that government is just irreplaceable. Governments cannot engineer the social order, they cannot eradicate inequalities of race and class, but the U.S. government has to stand for the equality of all its citizens and their entitlement to protection against fates they have no way to prepare for themselves. What was lost in the flood, much worse than the loss of property and life, was faith in the capacity of American government to protect citizens, and in protecting them equally, to honor their equality and your challenge, as young professionals, is to rebuild that faith and trust, and I have come here because I have absolutely no doubt in the world that you can do it.

Thanks for your attention.