

George W. Romney Administrator of the Year Speech
Remarks by Gene L. Dodaro,
Comptroller General of the United States/Head of the Government Accountability Office
April 7, 2022

Thank you very much, Lori, for that very kind and generous introduction. I want to thank BYU and Romney Institute for this honor. I also want to congratulate all the students on their awards. It's nice to see so many smiling faces. I also have enjoyed meeting the current faculty today and some of the alumni faculty. My father was a teacher. My brother's a teacher, my sister's a teacher, so I have the greatest respect for educators and the commitment that they make to making sure that successive generations of people here in the United States and young people get a good foundation for making great contributions to our society.

At the GAO, I'm fortunate to lead an organization that looks at the full breadth and scope of the federal government's operations. It's a marvelous job. Everything the federal government is involved in or thinking about doing, we're involved in. You'd be hard-pressed to name a national issue that we're not working on over time.

We have a lot of freedom. The Comptroller General has a 15-year term to ensure political independence, and to make sure that we do the best thing for the country, no matter what the politics are. We operate in a political environment and certainly, all of you have seen how challenging that can be these days. It always has been to a certain extent, but probably not to the full extent that it's been most recently. In any event, it's very important to stay focused on these issues now.

One of the biggest reasons that I went into public service was because my grandparents were immigrants to the United States. I saw what this country could do for people, and I wanted to give back through public service. Public service is a noble profession. At the GAO, we're able to make a difference. I never wanted to be somebody that just complained about the government. I wanted to get into the game and do something about it, and we've had a lot of opportunities. You've heard about some of these in the introductory remarks, but I'll give you some classic examples of how you can make a difference, no matter how difficult the issues are, if you apply yourself and work together.

We, the GAO, have been called upon during national emergencies. I became Acting Comptroller General on March 13, 2008, just as the global financial crisis was breaking. Bear Stearns was going under. Lehman Brothers went under. The credit markets froze, and banks wouldn't lend to other banks. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke and the Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson went to Congress and basically said we need \$700 billion to unfreeze the markets and help the banks. We're on the precipice of a catastrophe here.

While I'm not doubting them, I said, "Well, somebody should make sure that \$700 billion dollars goes to the right places, and that the American taxpayers' interests are protected." So, I sent to Congress, even though I was in an acting position, a proposal for accountability over that money. They took my suggestions and added additional requirements. We had to be on-site

at the Treasury Department the day the law was passed to help ensure that the program was designed properly. At the end of the day, we got more money back from the banks than we lent to them during that period.

We also helped the automakers. So, it was a great program, although it wasn't very popular. It was probably the most effective, unpopular program in the federal government's history. It was the right thing to do, at the time, and we would have gone into a depression without it, I'm convinced. I mean, we had a great recession, but it could have been a lot worse.

At that time, too, right after the banks were given the money, the automakers wanted money. GM, Chrysler, and Ford came to Washington and made the mistake of coming in their corporate jets. Congress sent them home.

After a while, concern deepened about the economy and what could happen: the ripple effects that would occur as a result if [the automakers] went into bankruptcy, the huge pension obligations that the government would have to absorb, and the supply chain issues and ripple effects. So, they brought [the automakers] back to Washington but basically said, you have to have a plan. What would you do with this money? And how much do you want? We're going to have GAO, the Federal Reserve, and the Treasury Department review your plan.

The automakers came back. I had two days to look at their plans before hearings before the Senate and the House. The Federal Reserve didn't show up. The Treasury Department didn't show up. People in the GAO said, "Well you're in an acting position, and it's risky for you to show up."

I said, "Well, look, this is a national emergency. If we're not helpful right now, what good are we?" So I went, and I showed up. I spent two hours testifying for the Senate. We laid out that if it was determined to be in the national interests to provide automakers help, and how it could be done to safeguard the taxpayers' interests.

Most recently, the latest national emergency was this pandemic that we've had. We tried to help get the government prepared. In 2015, we issued a report and said we need a plan for airline safety travel in the event of communicable diseases. Here we are five years later in 2020, with no plan and no effort to do this. While over time more than 75% of the recommendations we make are implemented, this was one of the areas that I was very disappointed in.

Once the money started flowing, it was over \$4.5 trillion. Congress said we want GAO to give us monthly briefings on how that money is being spent. What kind of goals are we achieving in public health? What kind of problem areas are we going to deal with in terms of economic repercussions? Money was flowing to individuals and businesses.

We've done that: we've issued bi-monthly and quarterly government-wide public reports. We've had over 140 individual reports, and we are about ready to issue the tenth government-wide report. We've made over 270 recommendations. We did a technology assessment of the vaccines to provide independent reassurance that if they were developed following the best practices for vaccine development. We tried to get a vaccine distribution and communication

plan in place earlier. We actually made the recommendation in September 2020. I think we got off to a bad start as a country convincing people to get vaccinated. We recommended that there be a national testing strategy back in January 2021. Unfortunately, that was slow to evolve as well.

On the transparency and accountability side, there's been more fraud than anybody would like. I just testified before Congress last month on ten legislative solutions that can be made to improve not only emergency spending but regular government spending as well.

One of the areas that Lori mentioned too is the high-risk areas. Our job since 1990 was to identify what the greatest emerging risks are before they become crisis proportions and to try to get the government ready.

In 1997, I designated computer security as a high-risk area across the whole government. This is the first time we had ever said anything across the whole government is high risk. In 2003, we designated critical infrastructure protection, electricity grid, and telecommunications [as a high risk-areas]. This led to a lot of legislation. Unfortunately, the government is still not in a position where it's operating at a pace commensurate with the evolving grave threat that we have in cybersecurity and there are signs of it everywhere. Ransomware at the state local level is a more recent manifestation. There are threats by state actors and non-state actors as well.

A few years ago, our weather satellites were aging, and they were at risk of being at the end of their useful lives. We raised this as an issue. The satellites are both the polar-orbiting satellites that give long-range forecasts and go around the globe twice a day and the geostationary satellites that provide warnings for tornadoes and short-term weather forecasts. We got the government to get its act together. As a result, we have more sophisticated weather satellites. Just another example of the positive impact that you can have. Aren't we glad that we have this capability now as a country, particularly given the more frequent and extreme weather events that are happening? You could save life and property here by giving people warning, so they can seek a safe haven. They can protect their property; they can protect their lives by having better warnings.

We did the same thing after 9/11 with the failures of the intelligence community to share information about terrorist threats among the different organizations. We worked with them, and now we have a much better system to share that information to protect our country. I was in Washington that day, watching the planes hit the Pentagon, and World Trade Center. It was horrible. I made a promise to myself to do everything I could to make sure I could help the country not endure that kind of attack again. I think you have to be prepared. You have to make a difference. You have to roll up your sleeves; you have to fix these problems to go forward.

Most recently, I added to the high-risk list "preventing and responding to drug misuse." Between 2000 to 2019, 800,000 people in this country died from a drug overdose. Last year, the latest figure was 100,000 people in one year. It's the highest it's ever been. This is a plague on our country, and it needs to be addressed. There is not enough federal leadership, so we have called for more federal leadership and coordination. Most recently we added to the Department of Health and Human Services leadership coordination for public health emergencies. For over a

decade now we have pointed out shortcomings [that have] become clearer in the most recent pandemic experience. More things need to be done in that area to define roles and responsibilities to make sure that there are better, consistent, clear communications with the public. This has been a problem -

Wear a mask, don't wear a mask.

Get this treatment or that treatment.

We need better data on the disproportionate effect that it's had on different elements of our society on a lot of different issues.

I also just want to speak to the students today about the ability of an ordinary person, son, grandson of immigrants to go into our government and make an impact and do things for our country. To provide help. There's no better way to use your talents and skills to help others, and public service gives you that ability.

I would encourage all students today, I know you're committed to public service, but some people wander away from it in search of profit and money. Don't ever stray too far from that public service at any point in your career. It's a noble profession, and it's something that you'll never be sorry that you've devoted a portion of your life to.

This summer, I'll have been in GAO for 49 years. I have three and a half years left on my term, and I'm going to enjoy every moment. I'll find some way to do public service after I'm done. At the GAO, there are many opportunities, and I just would offer you some, probably at this point, you're thinking, "gratuitous advice." And it is. But just a few things I think are really important to guide you:

One is to make sure that you have an immutable set of core values and ethics. Honesty and integrity are important. Reputation is your best currency. You will be tested in ways that you can't imagine right now. You have to be able to withstand that. Maintain your good reputation as the one thing in life that will carry you very effectively no matter what you do.

Secondly, hone your skills in working with and through other people. Your interpersonal skills will, even more than your technical ability, determine your success in life and in the future. It's important that you become a good listener and learner and that you focus on the issues that you believe are most important to you.

My third piece of advice is to know yourself: know what motivates you, what your talents are, and what your strengths are. Work on your weaknesses to become a better, more well-rounded person. You cannot and you will not motivate others if you lose your own intensity and focus. You have to always be aware of that and self-conscious of how you're going forward.

Lastly, work hard. There's no substitute for level of effort. That will carry you further than even your knowledge and your technical skills will. Don't be dissuaded by people who may tell you that you can't achieve these goals. I would not be standing before you today. People said somebody who was a career servant in GAO would never become the Comptroller General of the United States. I'm the first. I didn't give up. I would encourage you not to either. If you

believe in something, you want to be committed to it. You want to find a way to chart a course to achieve your goals and never settle for less than that.

It's been a pleasure to be with you today. This was my first trip to Utah. I will plan to come back. It's been a wonderful day. Thank you again for this honor. I'm humbled by it, and I wish all of you the best of success in whatever your goals are in life. Thank you.