

*Congressman Joe Kennedy III Prepared Remarks*  
*USNS Robert F. Kennedy*  
*September 20, 2016*

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Thank you Captain Joint that kind introduction, for your service, and for all of your efforts to make today possible.

It's an honor to be here this morning, among countless friends and family. Thank you all so much for being a part of this event.

I won't try to recognize every family member here –we'd be here 'til next week!

But I do need to give special thanks to one person in particular. Gramma – our fearless matriarch. Our mischievous heart. *Thank you* for giving each of us a safe port to come home to, no matter where the tides and the winds have carried us. Your love and support sustained the voyages of the sailor we remember today, and continue to guide each of our journeys.

Mr. Secretary -- we welcome you to back to our Commonwealth, which forever marked you with the insight of a Harvard lawyer and the heart of a Red Sox fan.

Of course, your patriotism extends far beyond Harvard Yard or Fenway Park. As a naval officer, Governor of Mississippi, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, or now as Secretary of the Navy, your career in public service has been shaped by the idea that American strength depends not just on muscle or might, but on the values that make this country worth defending in the first place.

From aggressive renewable energy goals to progressive family leave policies, you have brought vision and compassion to the helm of the U.S. Navy.

This class of ships continues that legacy. A fleet of vessels built in tribute to our most sacred American export – civil rights and human rights.

It's easy to imagine how much it would mean to Robert F. Kennedy to be included among such heroes of freedom and struggle.

People like John Lewis, his friend and brother in social justice. Like Sojourner Truth, on whose shoulders every modern civil rights activist stands. Harvey Milk. Justice Warren. Lucy Stone.

Within their stories lies the truth that came to define my grandfather's work and life: that American values aren't some stoic treasure or static ideal, to be placed on a pedestal and spoken of fondly with reverence and respect.

No. They are living, breathing beliefs that must be measured not in promises made but in promises kept. They demand our vigilance. Our fervor. Our fight.

That idea drove a young Robert Kennedy to the United States Navy.

Sixteen years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he watched officers at the Newport Naval Base practice dive-bombing in Narragansett Bay, just a few miles down the road from Portsmouth Priory where he was studying.

His two big brothers already wore Navy whites. His father had helped run Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, which turned out a record-setting number of Naval destroyers during World War I.

And so Robert Kennedy waited impatiently for his own day to serve, relying on tidbits from his brothers' letters and daydreams of the vessels he would one day proudly board.

Six weeks before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he enlisted in the Naval Reserve and entered the V-12 training unit in Boston.

His training was not exactly the adventure he had sought, grumbling to his eldest brother in a letter: "we haven't really had too much action here in Harvard Square" and counting the hours and days until he would be called overseas.

Finally, when the U.S.S. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. was commissioned in 1945, my grandfather was released from officer training to serve aboard the ship as a seaman.

On its first voyage, to Cuba, he proudly wrote to his parents that he: “passed the test in true Kennedy fashion and held on to his stomach.”

But beyond that, his letters spoke of something most formative during those years – the relationships he built with his fellow sailors, amidst the bunks and decks of that destroyer. The surprising bond he found with men from vastly different backgrounds than his own.

Years after his Navy service came to an end, it was this experience of Americans from all walks of life, united in a cause greater than themselves, that would shape his public service.

From the sharecroppers’ shacks of the Mississippi Delta to the migrant farms of California, the impoverished hollows of Appalachia and the housing projects of Bed-Stuy:

My grandfather would spend the rest of his life seeking to knit together a nation made of its many parts, a country where all work had dignity and every color and creed was respected.

In the shadows, in the background, in the quiet spaces that rarely sought – or received – attention, Robert Kennedy found the arteries of the American heart.

And he said to those forgotten: *Your country sees you. Your country counts you. Your country needs you.*

This class of ships tells that story. These are working ships. Steady, sturdy vessels on which all other operations will depend. Humble masterpieces, built by hardworking American hands. The brave backbone of a force that projects peace and stability to every corner of our planet and a fitting tribute to the names they proudly bear.

Secretary Mabus, my family is deeply grateful for the honor bestowed upon Robert F. Kennedy today.

We thank you, the United States Navy, and every man and women who bravely serves “not for self, but for country.” Our nation is forever in your debt. Thank you.