Today it is especially appropriate to draw our attention to civic engagement and public service and do so in the context of the first Howard Baker Center address. That is because Howard Baker epitomizes what civic engagement and public service can and should be. As a Senate leader, presidential advisor and ambassador to one of our nation’s most important allies, he has devoted much of his life to the betterment of his country and its welfare and security. It is in large measure because of the chance he gave me as a young man five years out of law school that I was able to do my own public service. I came to Washington to serve as his counsel in 1973 and participate in the Watergate drama as it unfolded before us in the historic caucus room of the U. S. Senate. Twenty years later I was elected to the Senate seat, which Howard Baker had held. He has been the inspiration for many of the political leaders of Tennessee.

Ronald Reagan was fond of stating that America is the shining city on a hill for the world to admire and emulate. As free citizens we have advanced the idea that freedom is the only acceptable state of being and that governments do not grant it, but it resides in each of us as a birthright. Despite sometimes falling short of our ideals, we have succeeding in being in many ways that shining city on a hill.

However, today that concept is under attack at home and abroad. Many say that the United States is no longer worthy of emulation, that it is an arrogant superpower that likes to throw its weight around, that it is more of the cause of problems than the solution. They say that our government stands by while the unfortunate suffer and that our leaders are heartless. Such notions are common among certain politicians, certain people in the news media and some in academia. They believe and promote these ideas.

This negativity toward our country has resulted in a good deal of cynicism and apathy among our citizens and especially among our young people. One has to only look at voter turnout, public opinion polls and public participation and attitude toward civic engagement. Polls indicate that fewer young people than ever before have any desire to consider government service of any kind. This is coming at a time of unprecedented threats to our country—a time of unprecedented need for us to have our best and brightest engaged in civic discourse, participation and service.

While our country is far from perfect and has had to overcome even institutionalized injustices since our founding, as someone who has had the opportunity as an ordinary citizen from Lawrenceburg, Tennessee to see our government as well as other governments work and operate, I can state unequivocally that these critics are wrong. It is ironic that it is the fact that we are so strong, committed to freedom and prosperous that allows so many of our citizens to take so much for granted and disengage from the civic process.
How do we counter these purveyors of cynicism? I believe it is with knowledge--knowledge and understanding--of what our country is all about, of its history and of what is happening in the world. Of course there is a responsibility on the part of the university to present a balanced view but it is ultimately up to us as individuals to read and learn about the fundamentals of our government and its role in history. To do less puts us on a road all too familiar to historians--a road to inevitable decline. In other words the very foundation of our republic is at stake.

Now, a bit more detail as to the nature of the challenges we face. I mentioned the caucus room and the Watergate hearings. Over 30 years later (just a few weeks ago) I had the opportunity to return to that same room to assist now Chief Justice John Roberts in his confirmation hearings. These hearings brought out the best and worst in Washington and much of the nation. There were the usual partisan shenanigans. There was the relatively new phenomenon of outside groups raising and spending millions of dollars to promote their narrow agendas. There were TV ads that accused Judge Roberts of such outrageous things that there sponsors had to pull them off the air. The New York Times tried to get into the adoption records of his young children. etc. etc.

However, the hearings were conducted well, the end result was a good one and, importantly, the hearings provided a much needed civics lesson as to the proper role of the Supreme Court; how it fits into our constitutional framework and how its proper functioning is vital to the rule of law. It is one of those rare occasions when the country gets to see all three branches of their government come together for a single purpose. The President nominates, the Senate confirms and the new member is added to the Supreme Court—one incidentally in this case that I believe will make our entire nation proud for many years to come.

I mentioned that at the heart of our problem with cynicism, apathy and in some cases outright hostility toward our government -- has much to do with the lack of proper knowledge and understanding. These hearings demonstrated once again that this lack of understanding is not limited to the average citizen but that sometimes the problem is evident in some leaders in this country. Time and again during the Roberts hearings some Senators tried to get Judge Roberts to--in effect -- commit to certain outcomes with regard to issues that would come before the Supreme Court in the future. Some became exasperated that he would not emote and speak to them “as a husband, a father or a son.” Others questioned his heart and his commitment to the “little guy.” All of this would have led the uninformed viewer to believe that the courts, and especially a Supreme Court justice, should be predisposed toward a particular side in a case based not upon the law and the facts of the case before them but based upon who is the most sympathetic of the litigants.

Other senators apparently thought that, even if Congress had not chosen to address a particular problem, the Supreme Court should jump in and solve it anyway.

This of course demonstrates a total lack of understanding of our constitutional framework and the role our Supreme Court plays in it as a tryer of cases based upon certain sets of facts where litigants, rich or poor, are treated the same under the law. It is the legislative branch that establishes policy, not the judiciary.
Although this flawed notion of the role of the court did not prevail in these hearings I couldn’t help but wonder how many people were discouraged at the notion that we were selecting a heartless person who would not carry out the rightful duties of a judge to decide cases on the basis of his own personal notion of justice.

A lack of knowledge and understanding leads to cynicism. Another example is the critics at home and abroad who say that our presence in Iraq is an example of U. S. imperialism, when in fact it is another example of America’s willingness to fight for other people’s freedom. Our brave men and women destroyed an evil regime that tortured and murdered hundreds and thousands of innocent people, invaded its neighbors, harbored international killers, defied numerous U.N. resolutions and undoubtedly had plans for a nuclear capability in the near future. And all the time they were corrupting U.N. and European officials with bribes. That situation would only have gotten worse without our intervention and would have been a ticking time bomb that we would ultimately have had to face under even more unfavorable circumstances.

Now we see a fledgling democracy struggling to form a constitution of the only part of the world that up until now has never known democracy. Since our intervention we have seen democratic movements blossom in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Moreover Libya has given up its nuclear program without a shot being fired. Even North Korea has come to the table.

Americans should not be defensive but should be proud that we are the country that the civilized world always calls on to deal with threats to all of us. Although some have short memories, it has been that way through world wars and other wars for decades and our forefathers have paid a tremendous price in terms of blood and treasure.

Another example. Because of the recent Katrina disaster and the TV coverage of so many tragically displaced people in New Orleans, many commentators and politicians rediscovered poverty in America and took the opportunity to lambaste our country for neglecting the problem. Once again our country looks better to those with a little knowledge. It is a myth that no progress has been made with regard to poverty. It is true that at 12.7%, it is about at the same level it has been for decades. However, among black citizens the figures have been reduced sharply. In fact experts tell us that the main reason for our stagnant poverty figures is immigration. We have uncontrolled entry of poor unskilled workers across our southern borders. Since 1980 Hispanics have represented almost ¾ of the increase in our poverty population.

During this time most government programs to assist the poor have been repeatedly expanded. But experts also acknowledge that the government can do only so much and that, tragically, many of those in poverty are in poverty because they are children being raised a single parent. Our teen birth rate still exceeds other industrialized nations, one out of every 3 children being born outside marriage. This is not to minimize the issue of poverty, this simply rebuts the image that some would give to this country.

Most countries nowadays have some form of elected government. When the United States came into being that was something new to the world--a democratic republic establishing the rule of law and the groundwork for a market based economy. Every country that has followed that example has prospered. Those that have not are almost all mired in poverty so I am proud of the contribution that my country has made not only to the cause of freedom but also to the lifting of millions out of poverty.
We all must constantly work to improve our country and ourselves but we cannot let these critics demoralize us. The stakes are too high. We must be together in these dangerous times and in order to be together we must understand the basis of our strength and our success as a nation. The U.S. is unusual among nations in that its national identity hinges more on shared ideals than it does on common ethnicity. And we should be proud to live in a country that upholds those ideals as the first and greatest mass democracy in the history of the world. We cannot maintain our democracy if we become fragmented, apathetic and cynical, and if we begin to celebrate our differences more than what we have in common. Or if we don’t improve on a poll I saw a few years ago that said that 75% of our young people had little or no faith in their government.

Technology, a shrinking world, terrorism, the aging of America and our continued dependence on foreign countries as major energy sources will make the next few decades the most dangerous and most exciting time imaginable. And it will present unbelievable opportunities for bright, motivated young people in both technical and policy positions.

- Who will reorganize a federal government structure that has so many layers, bureaus and agencies it can’t function?
- Who will reform the tax code before its weight and complexity overwhelms us (who will even volunteer to read it)?
- Who will figure out how to protect the safety of travelers without making it hardly worth the effort to travel?
- Who will determine if space travel is worth the money and the risk and if it is who will determine where we go and how we will build the machinery to get there?
- Who will figure out a healthcare system facing the retirement of the baby boomers that protects the elderly without bankrupting their grandchildren?
- Who will figure out how to protect our borders?

There are unprecedented opportunities in and out of government in elective office and out. But the people who grab hold of these issues must all have one thing in common: respect and love for their country based upon the knowledge and understanding of their values, which causes them to conclude that this country is worth preserving, not for just our own benefit, but for the sake of the world.

If these people have that, then all things are possible.