

He is the genuine personification of all of those words -- bravery, self-sacrifice, and courage -- that so many political aspirants shamelessly kick around during their vapid stump-speeches. Serving first on the battlefields of Iraq, then as a civilian military adviser in the rugged, unforgiving deserts of Afghanistan, and now as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Florida's 22nd Congressional district, Allen West has been a public servant, national icon, and unimpeachable role model for more than two decades. He won his House seat during the 2010 mid-term election, ousting Ron Klein by a comfortable 8.6 percent of the vote. West has received scads of awards for his devotion to the causes of freedom and democracy, including a Bronze Star, three Meritorious Service Medals, three Army Commendation Medals (one with Valor), and a Valorous Unit Award. He received his valor award as a Captain in Desert Shield/Storm and was named U.S. Army ROTC Instructor of the Year in 1993.

Q: What advice would you give youngsters who want to embark on a career in your industry?

A: I talk to them about one basic thing. And it's applicable to more than just politics. It's that people don't plan to fail; they fail to plan. So it's so important that they develop a plan and understand that all of the decisions that they make in life have consequences. And those consequences result in one of three things. You either gain more options for yourself, you keep the options that you have and maintain them, or you lose options. And I think that it's so important that we get our young people away from the [allure] of immediate gratification. The sound bite culture. They should start thinking about where they want to be in five years and start mapping out a plan for that. I had a great father and mother who helped me to lay out my path, so when I was in high school, in tenth grade, I knew that I wanted to be an officer in the United States Army. Although, four years ago, sitting in the deserts of Kandahar, Afghanistan, if you would have told me that I would be your congressional representative from South Florida, I would have told you that you were high on poppy.

Q: Of what professional accomplishment are you most proud?

A: I would have to say, easily, that it was commanding the greatest resource of the United States of America, and that's the sons in a combat zone in Iraq in 2003. To be entrusted to be a battalion commander, no doubt about it, that's the greatest honor I think I could ever have.

Q: What's the most challenging part about your work?

A: Contending with people who have a great comfort with lying. By that, I mean the people here in Washington, D.C., here in Congress. I think that this is a very insular world. There's a status quo, an establishment mentality, that you have to contend with. The most important thing, for me, is that at the end of the day, you have to be able to retain your honor, your integrity, and your character. Those are just fundamentals principles that I was raised with in the United States military. I don't see that happening with some people up here. Contending with

Washington, D.C., can create a culture shock. But the thing is that I'm in an environment in which, if we can get individuals to truly take a principled stand, we can turn it around in our country.

Q: What did you envision doing for a living when you were growing up?

A: Being an officer in the United States Army. My father was a World War II veteran, my mother served 25 years, civilian service to a Marine headquarters in Atlanta, and my brother was a Vietnam Marine, and that was it. I have been wearing a uniform since high school ROTC, back in 1975, 1976. So I knew the path I that wanted to be on. I loved history, I loved studying all the way back to the Civil War, the Revolutionary War, World War I, World War II, all the way up to the present day when I was growing up. It was something that intrigued me.

Q: In ten years' time, I will be _____.

A: A content, congressional representative, believing that I will have done the best I could for my country. And maybe I will be sitting around as a professor at Florida Atlantic University or Nova Southeastern University.

Q: Who are/were your professional role models and why?

A: My mother and my father. Everything I am today is because I had two parents were very focused, very disciplined. They knew that their commitment was to ensure that I had it better than they had it for themselves. They always taught me that this is a great country, and that it's built on the equal opportunity of knowing that nothing could hold you back, except for yourself. So I believed that I could climb any height that I wanted. My father and my mother, being black and being born in south Georgia, in 1920 and 1931, I would say there were some difficulties. But their resilience was something that they passed on to me. That's why I believe that anything you set your mind to do, you can achieve it. And as my mother always told me, "A man must stand for something, or else he'll fall for anything."

Q: If you could do anything else in the world for a living, what would it be?

A: I'd be a dive bum. It's peaceful and serene. After having a career in the military, as a paratrooper, I think my knees and my back would have enough of that. Just two Sundays ago, we had a dive event with some local war veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. We took a United States flag down about 70 or 80 feet underwater, and planted it on a wreck and took pictures with it, and had a great time with some veterans.

Q: What's the best part about your job?

A: The fact that for 22 years, I served to protect the great institutions of this republic and now I get to serve inside one of those institutions, which is the House of Representatives. And just trying to bring back that understanding of citizen-representative and servant to this country. You can't beat this.

Q: What's the worst part about your job?

A: Wishing you could do more. But it takes time.

Q: What's the one most important thing that experience has taught you?

A: That you have to be persistent. As I mentioned earlier, at the end of the day, there are three things you have to be able to say you kept. That's your honor, your integrity, and your character. As long as you can do that, every day is a great day.

Q: What's the best career advice anyone has imparted on you?

A: Don't screw it up. That was told to me by my brigade commander, Col. Denny Lewis, when I was his brigade operations officer at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Just in general. I was his operations officer, and when he brought me on his team, that's all he said, 'Don't screw it up.'

Q: What one thing would you do different/better if you could start it all over again?

A: I wouldn't do anything different. Because look at where I am right now. I think everything that I have been through, all of my experiences. Even bad experiences are things that you can glean lessons from. All of those things have helped to shape and form me to where I am today, into a very structured, disciplined, focused, confident and courageous man.

Q: What's your favorite South Florida charity?

A: I think the most important thing is the Wounded Warrior Foundation. Because I think about those men and women, who were willing to give the last full measure of devotion so that we could enjoy the freedoms and liberties that we have in this great nation. We owe them a gratitude that could never be fully repaid. For those who have come off that battlefield with some terrible, maiming injuries, we need to give them and their families all that we can give them.

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