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## Proof positive

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## Proof positive



*Photo by Joshua Ritchie*

**As he investigates terrorist plots and other crimes, Assistant FBI Director Michael Mason '80 mixes savvy leadership with a winning sense of optimism.**

**By Sherry Wallace**

As head of the FBI's Washington, D.C., field office, Michael Mason '80 obviously knows a lot more about the dangers facing this country on a daily basis than the average citizen ever will. In the span of his 19-year career with the bureau, he's seen, met, or arrested people behaving in ways that most of us fortunately experience only second-hand, through news reports or T.V. dramas: murderers, kidnapers, drug kingpins, corporate criminals — an endless parade of bad guys.

For all he's seen and knows, you might forgive Mason if he were to come across as a bit cynical or jaded. Instead, the former Illinois Wesleyan accounting major is relentlessly positive; an optimism that was amply displayed when he was invited back to campus in March by the University's Office of Admissions to serve as keynote speaker at the annual Scholars' Day program.

His speech, given at a luncheon for prospective high school students and their parents at IWU's Memorial Center, lasted less than 25 minutes but covered a lifetime, and the hard lessons learned from it. He spoke about his father, a Korean war hero who received head wounds in battle so severe that an Army surgeon refused to even treat him, until a friend begged him and the doctor agreed to try, saving Mason's father's life. He also spoke of a close friend who he had recruited into the FBI, and who was on the scene after the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attacks: "And he was the guy who went back into the building a third time, and the third time was when it collapsed and he was killed." These are some of the good guys in Michael Mason's world.

Later in his speech, he recalled a particularly memorable case that he dealt with as a young agent. A 2-year-old girl had disappeared right before Christmas, and when he and his partner — a hardened, older police detective — arrived at the home of the girl's family, they saw that all the holiday decorations adorning the home had been taken down. The message was clear: there would be no Christmas until their little girl was back home.

The case led Mason and his partner on a winding trail of clues that crossed international borders before the abducted girl was found in Canada and returned safely to her parents in the early spring. A short time after solving the case, which led to the arrest of the girl's non-custodial father, Mason and his partner returned to the family's home. Outside, where the little girl was playing, all the bushes and trees had been strung with lights.

Tears welled in Mason's eyes, and in his partner's, who gruffly warned, "Don't look at me!" Mason respectfully turned away.

Mason then spoke of the challenges facing today's bureau ("This is not your grandfather's FBI," he likes to say): trying to flush out the obscure but deadly plots of terrorists before they strike; nabbing white-collar criminals who steal from their companies, stock holders, consumers, and taxpayers; stopping the drug dealing and gang violence that destroys too many neighborhoods — all the while striving to "preserve the freedoms and liberties that we have come to embrace in this country."

Throughout his speech, Mason hit on a common theme, one that is simple to grasp but hard to achieve: you can transcend any circumstances in life if you hold to a positive attitude. "I am always looking over the next horizon," he concluded to the parents and students, before receiving a 30-second round of applause. "I'm an optimist and I always believe that next year is going to be better than the last year. And I loved the last year."

When Mason talks about overcoming adversity, he speaks from experience. One of six children, his mother died when he was a baby. His father was a truck driver. Mason grew up in Roseland, a predominantly black, working-class area on Chicago's south side. He recalls that many of the residents in his neighborhood did not have access to a formal education and struggled to make ends meet, but they were good people who saw promise in Mason as a young boy and encouraged him to pursue his dreams.

An early dream was to play for the Chicago Cubs. That was replaced in seventh grade when he saw an episode of *The FBI*, a T.V. show in which the agents tracked down criminals with scientific and methodical precision. Mason decided that being an agent was the perfect job for him. It was not the likeliest choice for an African American in the late 1960s. After all, few of the law enforcement officers on television at that time shared his skin color, nor did many of the policemen who drove through his neighborhood. But Mason took a lesson from Jackie Robinson, who broke the color line when he became the first black man to play baseball on a Major League team. Another one of Mason's good guys.



**Michael Mason (above) in his Washington, D.C., office, where a framed picture of Jackie Robinson is prominently displayed (Photo by Hilary Schwab)**

A large, framed portrait of Robinson hangs on the wall of Mason's Washington, D.C., office. It symbolizes a struggle that he keenly appreciates. In a profile on Mason published in the *Washington Post* last September, he said, "A lot of people who came into the FBI (who were) African American took a lot of grief, were not welcomed with open arms, and were given crappy jobs. I'm talking about 25 or 30 years ago."

Mason's FBI career, in contrast, has been a steady trajectory upward. The day of his commencement at Illinois Wesleyan — where he was known as a serious, dedicated student (maybe too serious, he admits in hindsight) — he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. Mason still wanted to be an FBI agent but felt he was too young and knew that being a Marine would give him a chance to see the world. He achieved the rank of captain prior to his honorable discharge in December 1984. In 1985, Mason was sworn in as a special agent for the FBI in its New Haven, Conn., field office. His initial assignments involved narcotics investigations, often working undercover, and he served on the office's SWAT team as a sniper/observer. It was also in Connecticut that he began dating his future wife,

Susan, a fellow agent who has since left the bureau. They have two sons, ages 9 and 12.

Mason's diverse resume in the FBI includes jobs at FBI headquarters and overseeing the resident agency in Syracuse, N.Y., and the field offices in both Buffalo, N.Y., and Sacramento, Calif.

On July 14, 2003, FBI Director Robert Mueller appointed Mason as assistant director, overseeing the Washington field office, which is the bureau's second largest, with 700 agents. The appointment put Mason in charge of some of the most important and perplexing cases now facing the bureau, including the ongoing anthrax and ricin investigations. Mason also heads investigations of cyber-crime and health-care and government fraud, and he oversees the offices' counter-intelligence efforts against foreign intelligence agents based in the nation's capital.

In a statement for the *IWU Magazine*, Mueller explained why he entrusted Mason to handle this demanding job: "Throughout his FBI career, Mike's dedication, knowledge, experience, and exceptional leadership have inspired his colleagues of the FBI to strive for excellence in meeting the global threats of the 21st century."

Mason's egalitarian approach to leadership was evident soon after he assumed command of the Washington field office, when he made a point of meeting not only agents, but support personnel, including the FBI's car mechanics.

"I met with the people who work in the garage because I believe that sets a tone — 'The boss is out at the garage,'" explains Mason. "The reason I care so much about people is because, number one, it is my nature, and number two, if I take care of my people, they will take care of our mission."

That mission has changed considerably since the FBI was founded in 1908 with a total of 10 special agents. Today the FBI is the world's most powerful crime-fighting agency, with 28,000 employees, 56 U.S. field offices, and 44 foreign liaison offices outside the United States. A division of the Department of Justice, headquartered in Washington, the bureau is charged with investigating violations of most federal criminal laws and with protecting America from foreign intelligence and terrorist activities.

The threat of terrorist attacks, according to Mason, has changed many fundamental ways in which the bureau operates. In leading the investigation of what a National Public Radio commentator called one of the most complex criminal cases in American history — the 2001 anthrax attacks, in which five people died — Mason has enlisted the skills of a small army of experts.

"I have eight Ph.Ds, two scientists, two psychologists, four metallurgists, and even more scuba divers who have helped us, and also a number of different linguists working that case," he says. "We have about 40 people in total. But, as you can see, we take people from all sorts of skills, from all disciplines, and from all areas. So it's really, really fascinating work. With this case we are *making* science (in) trying to figure out who perpetrated that crime, getting down to the molecular level."

Despite the complexities of such cases, solving them can seem like child's play compared to trying to prevent them — which is exactly what FBI agents are being asked to do in the war on terrorism. Mason explains the challenge. In the pre-9/11 days, the FBI would arrive at the scene of a typical crime such as a bank robbery or a kidnapping and be confronted with something like a 100-piece puzzle. "The thing about the puzzle pieces in those kinds of crimes is that the box top with the picture of the finished puzzle is sitting right there," he says. "You know what you have to do to put that puzzle together."

In contrast, "our number one job is disruption today," Mason continues. "Now, the box-top pictures are gone and instead of 100 pieces, you have 100,000 pieces. And embedded inside those 100,000 pieces is a 20-piece picture that you have to get out in front of and prevent before it happens," all the while preserving cherished constitutional rights and liberties.

This last part of the equation can be especially tricky when the urgency to prosecute the war on terrorism may tempt law enforcement officers to overlook the rights of suspects. Mason recalls one of his agents calling from the field with information “about this guy who’s an Islamic fundamentalist.

“He said, ‘We also know that he carries the Koran in the back of his car all the time.’ And I said, ‘Let me ask you, is that like a devout Catholic who always carries the Bible around?’ He stepped back and he realized what I was saying.

“You know, it is so much easier to go after an enemy that doesn’t look like you,” Mason continues. “But what I tell my people is that our challenge is to go in and investigate the what, not the who. That’s not enough. Otherwise we become like those places where you would never want to live, we would never want to live, even for a little while.”



**Above, Mason meets with John Perren, acting-special agent in charge of his field office’s counterterrorism branch.. (Photo by Hilary Schwab)**

While angered by 9/11, and the loss of his good friend who died in the attacks, Mason believes we only let terrorists win if we change our own fundamental values. He remembers how, on the Saturday after the attacks, he brought his two sons to the Smithsonian Institution and found it virtually empty.

“We had the run of the place,” says Mason, “but my attitude was I would rather be dead than to be forced to live a life not of my choosing. I just thought this was my finger in the eye of terrorists, my way of saying, no, you are *not* going to control my life. *You* are not going to take my heart away. *You* are not going to have me insulate myself inside my house.”

Mason’s passion on the subject of terrorism is tempered with a pragmatic perspective on its importance within the overall focus of his job. He says frankly, “If I had to list the top 10 threats of death to the average American, terrorism would not even make that list statistically.” Compared to the 3,000 people who died in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, there were more than 18,000 murders that same year in the U.S. and more than 23,000 alcohol-related deaths.

“Not to mention,” Mason adds, “thousands of rapes, physical assaults, and gang violence. So, the greatest threat that you or I will not make it home tonight is not from a terrorist. Terrorism is a hot political topic. We (the FBI) are engaged in all kinds of activities that we should be engaged in, but we must have a balance.”

For example, Mason says, “I think that some of the most important work the FBI does is investigate public corruption. If we lose the confidence in our institutions then we tear away at the very fabric that defines democracy. When you no longer trust the courts, when you no longer trust the police, when you no longer trust congressmen and senators, then that’s the beginning of the end for me.”

What Mason sees in the FBI — and why he remains committed to the agency, mind, body, and soul — is a group of people “who still believe in democracy, who still believe in the Constitution, who still believe in being dedicated to a purpose larger than themselves.”

Mason estimates that “probably a third of the agents today who come in take a significant pay cut to join the FBI. So they’re taking a pay cut to do something for the betterment of the whole of the country. ... All those old-fashioned values still drive agents to come to us.”



**“Understand what you want to do out in this world and then really go after it,” Mason told prospective students and their parents (above) attending this spring’s Scholars’ Day. (Photo by Joshua Ritchie)**

Mason knows the sacrifices that his agents have made in service of those values, and honors them. At the Scholars’ Day luncheon, he told the group about 15 of his agents who would be returning from a mission in Baghdad the following week. “They’re coming back at 2:30 a.m., and I’ll be there with Krispy Crème donuts and coffee to welcome them back,” said Mason, adding that he had turned away 40 more agents who volunteered for the dangerous assignment.

Although he is reluctant to acknowledge it directly, Mason has made his own sacrifices. A devoted family man, he treasures the leisurely walks he takes with his wife in the northern Virginia community where they live, especially when the cherry blossoms are at their peak. He also makes time on weekends for camping trips with his two sons. But, he concedes, his work can be a harsh mistress. “Even though I preach to all of my people that they should get out of the office, it is so hard for me to pull up stakes and leave at 5 o’clock.” After a workout in the gym, Mason is at his desk by 6:15 a.m., and stays until 7 or 7:30 p.m.

A lot of Mason’s day consists of meetings — in addition to discussions with his own staff, he attends three weekly meetings at the FBI headquarters, which is located only six blocks from his office. But he still finds the time to practice at the shooting range and, he says, “I still carry my handcuffs, and still carry my gun, and I know people must look at me and think ‘He is the assistant director; when is he going to arrest somebody?’— but you never know.”

Mason admits that, sometimes, when agents are mounting up to take on an assignment, he misses “being in the hunt.” But he also says, with complete sincerity, “I love my work. I truly look forward to going to work every day. I love what I do and the people I work with. ... I am living my dream, no different than if I was putting on a ball cap and walking out to Wrigley Field.”

Still, he can imagine a day when that work will end. He pictures himself sitting back, relaxing in his house with ESPN on, enjoying the comic section of the Sunday paper. But Mason isn’t ready to trade in his ball cap yet. His drive to succeed, to live life to the fullest, and to give something back remains as strong as ever.

Mike Mason is, most definitely, one of the good guys.