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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AT UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY  
AT WEST POINT COMMENCEMENT

Michie Stadium

West Point, New York

10:31 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you very much. Good morning.

AUDIENCE: Good morning.

THE PRESIDENT: It is wonderful to be back at the United States Military Academy -- the oldest continuously occupied military post in America -- as we commission the newest officers in the United States Army.

Thank you, General Hagenbeck, for your introduction, on a day that holds special meaning for you and the Dean, General Finnegan. Both of you first came to West Point in the Class of 1971 and went on to inspire soldiers under your command. You've led this Academy to a well-deserved recognition: best college in America. (Applause.) And today, you're both looking forward to a well-deserved retirement from the Army.

General Hagenbeck and Judy, General Finnegan and Joan, we thank you for 39 years of remarkable service to the Army and to America. (Applause.)

To the Commandant, General Rapp, the Academy staff and faculty, most of whom are veterans, thank you for your service and for inspiring these cadets to become the “leaders of character” they are today. (Applause.) Let me also acknowledge the presence of General Shinseki, Secretary McHugh, the members of Congress who are with us here today, including two former soldiers this Academy knows well, Senator Jack Reed and Congressman Patrick Murphy. (Applause.)

To all the families here -- especially all the moms and dads -- this day is a tribute to you as well. The decision to come to West Point was made by your sons and daughters, but it was you who instilled in them a spirit of service that has led them to this hallowed place in a time of war. So on behalf of the American people, thank you for your example and thank you for your patriotism. (Applause.)

To the United States Corps of Cadets, and most of all, the Class of 2010 -- it is a singular honor to serve as your Commander-in-Chief. As your Superintendent indicated, under our constitutional system my power as President is wisely limited. But there are some areas where my power is absolute. And so, as your Commander-in-Chief, I hereby absolve all cadets who are on restriction for minor conduct offenses. (Applause.) I will leave the definition of “minor” -- (laughter) -- to those who know better. (Laughter.)

Class of 2010, today is your day -- a day to celebrate all that you’ve achieved, in the finest tradition of the soldier-scholar, and to look forward to the important service that lies ahead.

You have pushed yourself through the agony of Beast Barracks, the weeks of training in rain and mud, and, I’m told, more inspections and drills than perhaps any class before you. Along the way, I’m sure you faced a few moments when you asked yourself: “What am I doing here?” I have those moments sometimes. (Laughter.)

You've trained for the complexities of today's missions, knowing that success will be measured not merely by performance on the battlefield, but also by your understanding of the cultures and traditions and languages in the place where you serve.

You've reached out across borders, with more international experience than any class in Academy history. You've not only attended foreign academies to forge new friendships, you've welcomed into your ranks cadets from nearly a dozen countries.

You've challenged yourself intellectually in the sciences and the humanities, in history and technology. You've achieved a standard of academic excellence that is without question, tying the record for the most post-graduate scholarships of any class in West Point history. (Applause.)

This includes your number one overall cadet and your valedictorian -- Liz Betterbed and Alex Rosenberg. And by the way, this is the first time in Academy history where your two top awards have been earned by female candidates. (Applause.)

This underscores a fact that I've seen in the faces of our troops from Baghdad to Bagram -- in the 21st century, our women in uniform play an indispensable role in our national defense. And time and again, they have proven themselves to be role models for our daughters and our sons -- as students and as soldiers and as leaders in the United States armed forces.

And the faces in this stadium show a simple truth: America's Army represents the full breadth of America's experience. You come from every corner of our country -- from privilege and from poverty, from cities and small towns. You worship all of the great religions that enrich the life of our people. You include the vast diversity of race and ethnicity that is fundamental to our nation's strength.

There is, however, one thing that sets you apart. Here in these quiet hills, you've come together to prepare for the most difficult test of our time. You signed up knowing your service would send you into harm's way, and you did so long after the first drums of war were sounded. In you we see the commitment of our country, and timeless virtues that have served our nation well.

We see your sense of duty -- including those who have earned their right shoulder patch -- their right shoulder combat patches, like the soldier who suffered a grenade wound in Iraq, yet still helped his fellow soldiers to evacuate -- your First Captain of the Corps of Cadets, Tyler Gordy. (Applause.)

We see your sense of honor -- in your respect for tradition, knowing that you join a Long Grey Line that stretches through the centuries; and in your reverence for each other, as when the Corps stands in silence every time a former cadet makes the ultimate sacrifice for our nation. Indeed, today we honor the 78 graduates of this Academy who have given their lives for our freedom and our security in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And we see your love of country -- a devotion to America captured in the motto you chose as a class, a motto which will guide your lives of service: "Loyal 'Til the End."

Duty. Honor. Love of country. Everything you have learned here, all that you've achieved here, has prepared you for today -- when you raise your right hand; when you take that oath; when your loved one or mentor pins those gold bars on your shoulders; when you become, at long last, commissioned officers in the United States Army.

This is the ninth consecutive commencement that has taken place at West Point with our nation at war. This time of war began in Afghanistan -- a place that may seem as far away from this peaceful bend in the Hudson River as anywhere on Earth. The war began only because our own cities and civilians were attacked by violent extremists who plotted from a distant place, and it continues only because that plotting persists to this day.

For many years, our focus was on Iraq. And year after year, our troops faced a set of challenges there that were as daunting as they were complex. A lesser Army might have seen its spirit broken. But the American military is more resilient than that. Our troops adapted, they persisted, they partnered with coalition and Iraqi counterparts, and through their competence and creativity and courage, we are poised to end our combat mission in Iraq this summer. (Applause.)

Even as we transition to an Iraqi lead and bring our troops home, our commitment to the Iraqi people endures. We will continue to advise and assist Iraqi security forces, who are already responsible for security in most of the country. And a strong American civilian presence will help Iraqis forge political and economic progress. This will not be a simple task, but this is what success looks like: an Iraq that provides no haven to terrorists; a democratic Iraq that is sovereign and stable and self-reliant.

And as we end the war in Iraq, though, we are pressing forward in Afghanistan. Six months ago, I came to West Point to announce a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. And I stand here humbled by the knowledge that many of you will soon be serving in harm's way. I assure you, you will go with the full support of a proud and grateful nation.

We face a tough fight in Afghanistan. Any insurgency that is confronted with a direct challenge will turn to new tactics. And from Marja to Kandahar, that is what the Taliban has done through assassination and indiscriminate killing and intimidation. Moreover, any country that has known decades of war will be tested in finding political solutions to its problems, and providing governance that can sustain progress and serve the needs of its people.

So this war has changed over the last nine years, but it's no less important than it was in those days after 9/11. We toppled the Taliban regime -- now we must break the momentum of a Taliban insurgency and train Afghan security forces. We have supported the election of a sovereign government -- now we must strengthen its capacities. We've brought hope to the Afghan people -- now we must see that their country does not fall prey to our common enemies. Cadets, there will be difficult days ahead. We will adapt, we will persist, and I have no doubt

that together with our Afghan and international partners, we will succeed in Afghanistan. (Applause.)

Now even as we fight the wars in front of us, we also have to see the horizon beyond these wars -- because unlike a terrorist whose goal is to destroy, our future will be defined by what we build. We have to see that horizon, and to get there we must pursue a strategy of national renewal and global leadership. We have to build the sources of America's strength and influence, and shape a world that's more peaceful and more prosperous.

Time and again, Americans have risen to meet and to shape moments of change. This is one of those moments -- an era of economic transformation and individual empowerment; of ancient hatreds and new dangers; of emerging powers and new global challenges. And we're going to need all of you to help meet these challenges. You've answered the call. You, and all who wear America's uniform, remain the cornerstone of our national defense, the anchor of global security. And through a period when too many of our institutions have acted irresponsibly, the American military has set a standard of service and sacrifice that is as great as any in this nation's history. (Applause.)

Now the rest of us -- the rest of us must do our part. And to do so, we must first recognize that our strength and influence abroad begins with steps we take at home. We must educate our children to compete in an age where knowledge is capital, and the marketplace is global. We must develop clean energy that can power new industry and unbound us from foreign oil and preserve our planet. We have to pursue science and research that unlocks wonders as unforeseen to us today as the microchip and the surface of the moon were a century ago.

Simply put, American innovation must be the foundation of American power -- because at no time in human history

has a nation of diminished economic vitality maintained its military and political primacy. And so that means that the civilians among us, as parents and community leaders, elected officials, business leaders, we have a role to play. We cannot leave it to those in uniform to defend this country -- we have to make sure that America is building on its strengths. (Applause.)

As we build these economic sources of our strength, the second thing we must do is build and integrate the capabilities that can advance our interests, and the common interests of human beings around the world. America's armed forces are adapting to changing times, but your efforts have to be complemented. We will need the renewed engagement of our diplomats, from grand capitals to dangerous outposts. We need development experts who can support Afghan agriculture and help Africans build the capacity to feed themselves. We need intelligence agencies that work seamlessly with their counterparts to unravel plots that run from the mountains of Pakistan to the streets of our cities. We need law enforcement that can strengthen judicial systems abroad, and protect us here at home. And we need first responders who can act swiftly in the event of earthquakes and storms and disease.

The burdens of this century cannot fall on our soldiers alone. It also cannot fall on American shoulders alone. Our adversaries would like to see America sap its strength by overextending our power. And in the past, we've always had the foresight to avoid acting alone. We were part of the most powerful wartime coalition in human history through World War II. We stitched together a community of free nations and institutions to endure and ultimately prevail during a Cold War.

Yes, we are clear-eyed about the shortfalls of our international system. But America has not succeeded by stepping out of the currents of cooperation -- we have succeeded by steering those currents in the direction of liberty and justice, so nations thrive by meeting their responsibilities and face consequences when they don't.

So we have to shape an international order that can meet the challenges of our generation. We will be steadfast in strengthening those old alliances that have served us so well, including those who will serve by your side in Afghanistan and around the globe. As influence extends to more countries and capitals, we also have to build new partnerships, and shape stronger international standards and institutions.

This engagement is not an end in itself. The international order we seek is one that can resolve the challenges of our times -- countering violent extremism and insurgency; stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and securing nuclear materials; combating a changing climate and sustaining global growth; helping countries feed themselves and care for their sick; preventing conflict and healing wounds. If we are successful in these tasks, that will lessen conflicts around the world. It will be supportive of our efforts by our military to secure our country.

More than anything else, though, our success will be claimed by who we are as a country. This is more important than ever, given the nature of the challenges that we face. Our campaign to disrupt, dismantle, and to defeat al Qaeda is part of an international effort that is necessary and just.

But this is a different kind of war. There will be no simple moment of surrender to mark the journey's end -- no armistice, no banner headline. Though we have had more success in eliminating al Qaeda leaders in recent months than in recent years, they will continue to recruit, and plot, and exploit our open society. We see that in bombs that go off in Kabul and Karachi. We see it in attempts to blow up an airliner over Detroit or an SUV in Times Square, even as these failed attacks show that pressure on networks like al Qaeda is forcing them to rely on terrorists with less time and space to train. We see the potential duration of this struggle in al Qaeda's gross distortions of Islam, their disrespect for human life, and their attempt to prey upon fear and hatred and prejudice.

So the threat will not go away soon, but let's be clear: Al Qaeda and its affiliates are small men on the wrong side of history. They lead no nation. They lead no religion. We need not give in to fear every time a terrorist tries to scare us. We should not discard our freedoms because extremists try to exploit them. We cannot succumb to division because others try to drive us apart. We are the United States of America. (Applause.) We are the United States of America, and we have repaired our union, and faced down fascism, and outlasted communism. We've gone through turmoil, we've gone through Civil War, and we have come out stronger -- and we will do so once more. (Applause.)

And I know this to be true because I see the strength and resilience of the American people. Terrorists want to scare us. New Yorkers just go about their lives unafraid. (Applause.) Extremists want a war between America and Islam, but Muslims are part of our national life, including those who serve in our United States Army. (Applause.) Adversaries want to divide us, but we are united by our support for you -- soldiers who send a clear message that this country is both the land of the free and the home of the brave. (Applause.)

You know, in an age of instant access to information, a lot of cynicism in the news, it's easy to lose perspective in a flood of pictures and the swirl of political debate. Power and influence can seem to ebb and flow. Wars and grand plans can be deemed won or lost day to day, even hour to hour. As we experience the immediacy of the image of a suffering child or the boasts of a prideful dictator, it's easy to give in to the belief sometimes that human progress has stalled -- that events are beyond our control, that change is not possible.

But this nation was founded upon a different notion. We believe, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,

that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (Applause.) And that truth has bound us together, a nation populated by people from around the globe, enduring hardship and achieving greatness as one people. And that belief is as true today as it was 200 years ago. It is a belief that has been claimed by people of every race and religion in every region of the world. Can anybody doubt that this belief will be any less true -- any less powerful -- two years, two decades, or even two centuries from now?

And so a fundamental part of our strategy for our security has to be America's support for those universal rights that formed the creed of our founding. And we will promote these values above all by living them -- through our fidelity to the rule of law and our Constitution, even when it's hard; even when we're being attacked; even when we're in the midst of war.

And we will commit ourselves to forever pursuing a more perfect union. Together with our friends and allies, America will always seek a world that extends these rights so that when an individual is being silenced, we aim to be her voice. Where ideas are suppressed, we provide space for open debate. Where democratic institutions take hold, we add a wind at their back. When humanitarian disaster strikes, we extend a hand. Where human dignity is denied, America opposes poverty and is a source of opportunity. That is who we are. That is what we do.

We do so with no illusions. We understand change doesn't come quick. We understand that neither America nor any nation can dictate every outcome beyond its borders. We know that a world of mortal men and women will never be rid of oppression or evil. What we can do, what we must do, is work and reach and fight for the world that we seek -- all of us, those in uniform and those who are not.

And in preparing for today, I turned to the world -- to the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes. And reflecting on his Civil War experience, he said, and I quote, "To fight out a war you must believe in something and want something with all your might. So must you do to carry anything else to an end worth reaching." Holmes went on, "More than that, you must be willing to commit yourself to a course, perhaps a long and hard one, without being able to foresee exactly where you will come out."

America does not fight for the sake of fighting. We abhor war. As one who has never experienced the field of battle -- and I say that with humility, knowing, as General MacArthur said, "the soldier above all others prays for peace" -- we fight because we must. We fight to keep our families and communities safe. We fight for the security of our allies and partners, because America believes that we will be safer when our friends are safer; that we will be stronger when the world is more just.

So cadets, a long and hard road awaits you. You go abroad because your service is fundamental to our security back home. You go abroad as representatives of the values that this country was founded upon. And when you inevitably face setbacks -- when the fighting is fierce or a village elder is fearful; when the end that you are seeking seems uncertain -- think back to West Point.

Here, in this peaceful part of the world, you have drilled and you have studied and come of age in the footsteps of great men and women -- Americans who faced times of trial, and who even in victory could not have foreseen the America they helped to build, the world they helped to shape.

George Washington was able to free a band of patriots from the rule of an empire, but he could not have foreseen his country growing to include 50 states connecting two oceans.

Grant was able to save a union and see the slaves freed, but he could not have foreseen just how much his country would extend full rights and opportunities to citizens of every color.

Eisenhower was able to see Germany surrender and a former enemy grow into an ally, but he could not have foreseen the Berlin Wall coming down without a shot being fired.

Today it is your generation that has borne a heavy burden -- soldiers, graduates of this Academy like John Meyer and Greg Ambrosia who have braved enemy fire, protected their units, carried out their missions, earned the commendation of this Army, and of a grateful nation.

From the birth of our existence, America has had a faith in the future -- a belief that where we're going is better than where we've been, even when the path ahead is uncertain. To fulfill that promise, generations of Americans have built upon the foundation of our forefathers -- finding opportunity, fighting injustice, forging a more perfect union. Our achievement would not be possible without the Long Grey Line that has sacrificed for duty, for honor, for country. (Applause.)

And years from now when you return here, when for you the shadows have grown longer, I have no doubt that you will have added your name to the book of history. I have no doubt that we will have prevailed in the struggles of our times. I have no doubt that your legacy will be an America that has emerged stronger, and a world that is more just, because we are Americans, and our destiny is never written for us, it is written by us, and we are ready to lead once more.

Thank you. May God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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11:04 A.M. EDT