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Barack Obama

U.S. Air Force Academy Commencement Address

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Hello, Air Force! Thank you so much. Thank you. It is wonderful to be back at the United States Air Force Academy! Thank you.

Secretary James, for your service to our Air Force and to our nation. Governor Hickenlooper, Academy leaders, faculty and staff -- especially your outstanding Superintendent, Lieutenant General Michelle Johnson. And most of all, congratulations to the Class of 2016!

As he prepares to conclude a remarkable 40-year career in the Air Force -- a career that started on this day 40 years ago -- please join me in saluting someone who many of you look up to and whose counsel I've relied on as well -- Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh. Thank you, Mark. Thank you, Mark, and thank you, Betty.

And although he's not here today, I am proud to have nominated another Academy graduate -- and a combat-tested pilot -- to serve as the 21st Air Force Chief of Staff, General David Goldfein.



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Cadets, you can take enormous pride in all the hard work that has brought you to this day. I also ask you to give a big round of applause to all your moms and dads, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles who supported you and sacrificed for you so you could be here today. Give them another round of applause.

Now, I have to tell you, some days I spend more time with the Air Force than my own family. Especially on Air Force One. You take good care of me. You are always on time. You never lose my luggage. I don't have to take off my shoes before I get on. So I'm really going to miss Air Force One -- as well as the incredible Airmen that I've come to know. And that includes the pilots who flew me here -- Lieutenant Colonels Dan Thorn and Rob Tobler and Major Brett Ellis -- all three of them proud Air Force Academy graduates. Give them a big round of applause.

This Academy is one of our nation's most selective academic institutions. Just being accepted is a big deal -- a testament to your talent and your leadership. And we are particularly grateful to those of you with prior enlisted service, including Cameron Kistler, who deployed to Iraq -- Robert Parati and Clayton Logan, who deployed to Afghanistan. We thank you. Your country thanks you.

Cadets, here you were tested by fire -- literally. When you went through Beast, as General Johnson noted, Waldo Canyon was actually on fire. During Recognition, you ran to the Rock in a blizzard. So you have more than earned your unofficial motto -- "forged in fire and tempered in ice." Which is a great motto -- although it does sound like something out of Game of Thrones.

And through it all, you've become like family. You survived morning accountability formations, survived living in Sijan Hall. That night in F-1 where you learned to "earn each day." You cheered Coach Calhoun and the Falcons as I've welcomed them to the White House to present the Commander-in-Chief Trophy -- which Air Force has won a record 19 times.

And I look out into your ranks and I see Airmen who will excel as pilots and engineers, analysts -- so many specialties. The first cyber graduates in this Academy's history. And David Higgins, a marksman who's going to the Olympics in Rio -- bring home the gold, David! No pressure.



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In you, I see men and women of integrity and service and excellence. And you've made us all proud. And perhaps no one would have been more proud of your success than Major David Brodeur, whose sacrifice in Afghanistan we honor, and whose family joins us today -- 2016.

You've learned other lessons, as well, like what happens when you paint one of the planes on the Terrazo in your class color. With such "achievements" in mind -- I hereby grant amnesty to all cadets serving restrictions and confinements for minor offenses. Only minor.

Today, we congratulate our newest Air Force officers. On behalf of the American people, I thank you for choosing a life of service. In the coming weeks, some of you will head to the chapel to get married. In the years ahead, you and your families will serve around the world. As officers, you'll be responsible for the lives of those under your command, and you'll be called upon to lead with wisdom, courage and compassion. That's what I want to talk with you about today.

I've served as Commander-in-Chief for nearly eight years now. It has been the highest honor of my life to lead the greatest military in the history of the world. It inspires me every day.

Today will be the last time that I have the honor of addressing a graduating class of military officers. And there's a debate going on in our country about our nation's role in the world. So, with that in mind, I hope you don't mind if I share some lessons I've learned as Commander-in-Chief -- lessons that you may find useful as you lead those under your command, and as we work together to keep our nation strong and secure.

First, as you look at the world, be guided by an honest and clear-eyed assessment.

Remember what you learned at this Academy -- the importance of evidence and facts and judgment. And here's a fact: The United States of America remains the most powerful nation on Earth and a force for good.

We have big challenges in our country -- in our politics, our economy, our society. Those are challenges we have to address. But look around. We have the world's strongest economy.

Our scientists, our researchers, our entrepreneurs are global leaders in innovation. Our colleges and universities attract the best talent from around the world. Our values -- freedom, equality, opportunity -- those values inspire people everywhere, including immigrants who come here, ready to work, and integrate and help renew our country.



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Our standing in the world is higher. I see it in my travels from Havana to Berlin to Ho Chi Minh City -- where huge crowds of Vietnamese lined the streets, some waving American flags. So make no mistake, the United States is better positioned to lead in the 21st century than any other nation.

And here's another fact: Our military is, by a mile, the strongest in the world. Yes, after two major ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we're drawing down the size of our Armed Forces, which is natural and necessary. And we have to keep improving readiness and modernizing our force. But it is undeniable -- our military is the most capable fighting force on the planet. It's not close.

Our soldiers are the best-trained, best-equipped land force on Earth, tested by years of combat, able to sustain power anywhere in the globe. Nobody can match our Army. Our sailors serve on aircraft carriers that can go almost anywhere, and submarines that move undetected -- the largest and most lethal Navy in the world, on track to surpass 300 ships. Nobody can match our Navy. Our Marines are ready at a moment's notice, "first to fight" or deliver help in a crisis, the world's only truly global expeditionary force. Nobody can match our Marines. Our Coast Guardsmen serve on the most advanced cutters in history, and special teams can shoot smugglers' engines, hook and climb or repel aboard, protecting our shores. Nobody can match our Coast Guard.

And as for our Airmen -- with your unequaled vigilance and reach, unrivaled fifth-generation fighters, a new generation of remotely piloted aircraft pilots, astonishing precision that calls to mind your actual class motto, "On Target, On Time" -- nobody can match America's Air Force.

Not only that, no other nation brings its forces together like we do in one joint force, as we saw in an operation against ISIL in Syria just last year. Air Force aircraft provided surveillance. Navy F-18s provided close air support. Army aviation assets delivered our Special Operators, an assault force of Marines and soldiers, to the target, and one of ISIL's top leaders, Abu Sayyaf, was eliminated. That's the power of America's military. And we need to keep it that way.



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And here's one more fact as you go out into the world: We are blessed to be living in the most peaceful, most prosperous era in human history. Now, that sounds controversial until you survey the history of the world. It's hard to see, with all the violence and suffering in the world, and what's reported on the news every day. But if you step back for a moment -- think about last week, when I was in Hiroshima to remember all who were lost in a World War that killed some 60 million people -- not 60,000, 60 million.

For decades, there have been no wars between major powers. Wars between nations are increasingly rare. More people live in democracies. More than 1 billion people have been lifted from extreme poverty. From the Americas to Africa to Southeast Asia, there's a new generation of young people, connected by technology and ready to make their mark. I've met them. They look up to America. They aspire to be our partner. That's the progress and the hope that we have to build on. And so much of that derives from the extraordinary leadership and sacrifice of our Air Force and the other branches of our military.

So we are well-positioned. You enter this moment with a lot of good cards to play. But we face serious threats. Terrorist networks slaughter the innocent and plot attacks against our nation. Civil wars like in Iraq tear countries apart and create humanitarian catastrophes and havens for terrorists. Russian aggression against Ukraine, disputes in the South China Sea -- these are testing an international order that we built, where the sovereignty of nations is respected and all nations abide by the same rules. Nuclear weapons, as in North Korea, and the specter of nuclear terrorism still threaten us all.

So how to meet these threats while also seizing the incredible opportunities of this moment in history, that's going to be your challenge -- the challenge of your generation.

Which leads me to a second lesson. As we navigate this complex world, America cannot shirk the mantle of leadership. We can't be isolationist. It's not possible in this globalized, interconnected world. In these uncertain times, it's tempting sometimes to pull back and try to wash our hands of conflicts that seem intractable, let other countries fend for themselves. But history teaches us, from Pearl Harbor to 9/11, that oceans alone cannot protect us. Hateful ideologies can spark terror from Boston to San Bernardino.



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In a global economy, it's not possible to stop trading goods and services with other countries. Weak public health systems on the other side of the world allow diseases to develop that end up reaching our shores. So we cannot turn inward. We cannot give in to isolationism. That's a false comfort. Allowing problems to fester over there makes us less secure here. So, as Americans, we have to keep leading and working with others to build the security and prosperity and justice we want in the world.

By the way, one of the most effective ways to lead and work with others is through treaties that advance our interests. Lately, there's been a mindset in Congress that just about any international treaty is somehow a violation of American sovereignty, and so the Senate almost never approves treaties anymore. They voted down a treaty to protect disabled Americans, including our veterans, while Senator and World War II veteran Bob Dole was sitting right there in the Senate chambers in a wheelchair.

We don't always realize it, but treaties help make a lot of things in our lives possible that we take for granted -- from international phone calls to mail. Those are good things. Those are not a threat to our sovereignty. I think we can all agree on that.

But also from NATO to treaties controlling nuclear weapons, treaties help keep us safe. So if we're truly concerned about China's actions in the South China Sea, for example, the Senate should help strengthen our case by approving the Law of the Sea Convention -- as our military leaders have urged. And by the way, these treaties are not a new thing. The power to make treaties is written into our Constitution. Our Founding Fathers ratified lots of treaties. So it's time for the Senate to do its job and help us advance American leadership, rather than undermine it.

A part of the reason this is so important is because the United States remains the one indisputable nation in world affairs. I say this all the time. After eight years, I have not gone to an international conference, summit, meeting where we were not the ones who made the agenda possible -- even if we weren't hosting it. We have more alliances with other countries than anybody else -- and they're the foundation of global stability and prosperity. On just about every issue, the world looks to us to set the agenda. When there's a problem around the world, they do not call Beijing or Moscow -- they call us.



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And we lead not by dictating to other nations, but by working with them as partners; by treating other countries and their peoples with respect, not by lecturing them. This isn't just the right thing to do; it's in our self-interest. It makes countries more likely to work with us, and, ultimately, it makes us more secure. So we need smart, steady, principled American leadership.

And part of leading wisely is seeing threats clearly. Remember Ebola? That was a serious threat, and we took it seriously. But in the midst of it, there was hysteria. "Flights must be banned!" "Quarantine citizens!" These were actual quotes. "Seal the border!" And my favorite -- "Remove Obama...or millions of Americans die!" That's an actual quote.

The thing is, when we panic, we don't make good decisions. So, with Ebola, instead of responding with fear, we responded with facts and responded with science and organization. And thanks to a coordinated global response -- enabled by the American military and our medical workers who got in there first -- we stopped the spread of Ebola in West Africa and saved countless lives, and protected ourselves.

So we've got to engage with the world. We can't pull back. Of course, leading wisely also means resisting the temptation to intervene militarily every time there's a problem or crisis in the world. History is littered with the ruins of empires and nations that overextended themselves, draining their power and influence. And so we have to chart a smarter path. As we saw in Vietnam and the Iraq War, oftentimes the greatest damage to American credibility comes when we overreach, when we don't think through the consequences of all of our actions. And so we have to learn from our history. And that also means we're doing right by our men and women in uniform.

So, cadets, in your positions of leadership, you will be called upon to sustain this balance -- to be hard-headed and big-hearted; guided by realism and idealism, even when these forces are sometimes at odds. We've got to have the realism to see the world as it is -- where sometimes uncomfortable compromises are necessary; where we have the humility to recognize that there are limits to what even a nation as powerful as ours can do; that there may be wars we cannot always stop right away, or lives we cannot save.



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But we also need the idealism that sees the world as it ought to be -- a commitment to the universal values of democracy and equality and human rights, and a willingness to stand up for them around the world -- not just when it's easy, but when it's hard. Because that's who we are and that's American leadership.

At times, ensuring our security requires the use of military force. That's the third lesson I want to discuss. As Commander-in-Chief, I have not hesitated to use force, unilaterally where necessary, to protect the American people. Thanks to our military, intelligence and counterterrorism professionals, bin Laden is gone. Anwar al-Awlaki, a leader of the al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen, is gone. Ahmed Abdi Godane, the al Qaeda leader in Somalia -- he's gone. Ahmed Abu Khattala, accused in the attacks in Benghazi -- captured. Mohammad Mansur, the leader of the Taliban -- gone. Leader after leader in ISIL -- Haji Mutazz, their number two; Mohamed Emwazi, who brutally murdered Americans; Abu Nabil, the ISIL leader in Libya -- all gone. Abu Dawud, a leader of their chemical weapons program -- captured.

The list goes on. Because if you target Americans, we will find you and justice will be done, and we will defend our nation.

But even as we celebrate the courage of our troops who serve in war, even where we do not hesitate to act on behalf of our security, we should never celebrate war itself. War, no matter how noble our intentions may be, promises agony and tragedy. And no one knows this more than those who fight those wars -- our wounded warriors who bear the scars, seen and unseen; our veterans, who remember their fallen comrades; our Gold Star families, whose hearts ache with pride and with loss.

We have a solemn responsibility to these Americans who sacrifice in our name. We have a responsibility to be guided by intelligence, and not ideology, and to never rush into war, and to explore other options first. Because sending our troops into harm's way must always be a last resort.

And sometimes those decisions are tough. I know, for example, that my decision not to conduct strikes against Syria after it used chemical weapons was controversial among some in Washington. But because we seized a diplomatic option, backed by our threat of force, nations came together and we accomplished far more than military strikes ever could have -- all of Syria's declared chemical weapons were successfully removed.



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And in acting militarily, we have a responsibility, whenever possible, to build coalitions and partnerships. There are times where we have to do it alone. But on a whole lot of global problems, the United States shouldn't bear the entire burden of global security by itself. Others have to step up. That's why, as we assist and train Afghan forces, we're part of a 39-nation coalition. Our coalition against ISIL includes 66 partners, including Arab nations. We've learned that often the best way to defeat terrorists is not by sending large numbers of American ground forces to occupy and patrol foreign cities and towns. It's better to train and build up local partners -- they're the ones who have to stabilize their own countries over the long term.

Compared to when I came into office -- when we had nearly 180,000 American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq -- today that number is less than 15,000. Most of our troops have come home. Our local partners on the ground are in the lead. And as ISIL continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, these terrorists are learning the same lesson as others before them -- you will never be strong enough to destroy America or our way of life. You are going to lose. But part of that is because we're on the right side of history, and part of it is because we can mobilize others to work with us.

When we use force, we have a responsibility to use it proportionally. Unlike terrorists who try to kill as many people as possible, the United States military goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid civilian casualties. It's the tragedy of war, however, whenever -- whether it's conventional warfare or precision strikes -- that innocents sometimes are caught in the crossfire. And these are deaths that haunt us all. Nobody more than me. As technology evolves, we can never grow numb to the consequences of our actions. We have to hold ourselves to high standards, be even more transparent, and do everything in our power to prevent the loss of innocent life. That's how America goes to war. And that's how, ultimately, America also wins the peace.

And we have a responsibility to always give our troops a clear mission, the support they need to get the job done, and a plan for what comes after. I insisted, for example, that our surge of forces in Afghanistan be matched with a transition to ensure Afghans took responsibility for their own security.



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In Libya, we were right to launch an air campaign to prevent Qaddafi from massacring innocent civilians, but we didn't do enough to plan for the day after, when deep-rooted tribalism plunged Libya into disorder.

In Syria, the suffering in the civil war has been heartbreaking to see a nation shattered, and hundreds of thousands killed and millions driven from their homes. It is gut-wrenching. And as a father, I look at Syria's children and I see my own. That's why we've said the dictator, Assad, must go and why we support a moderate Syrian opposition. And it's why America provides more humanitarian aid to the Syrian people than any other nation.

But suggestions for deeper U.S. military involvement in a conflict like the Syrian civil war have to be fully thought through, rigorously examined with an honest assessment of the risks and tradeoffs. How will it alter the conflict? What comes next? When we ask those questions, we prevent the kind of mission creep that history teaches us to avoid.

If Iran and Russia want to spill their blood and treasure trying to prop up their Syrian client and get sucked into a quagmire, that is their choice. As President of the United States, I've made a different choice. And the only real solution to the Syrian conflict is a political solution, including a transition away from Assad. And that takes diplomacy -- not American soldiers being dragged into the middle of another civil war in the Middle East. Our foreign policy has to be strong, but it also has to be smart.

Which brings me to my last lesson that I want to share: As powerful as our military is, we have to remember that many of the threats to our security cannot be solved by military force alone. We've got to draw on every tool, all elements of our national power.

When we invest in the development that promotes education and opportunity around the globe, it can make conflicts and military interventions less likely later. So if you want to support our military, you also have to be in favor of foreign assistance that helps some young person learn in a very poor country, because it may end up making it less necessary to send our sons and daughters somewhere to fight. You can't separate the two.

When we encourage economic and political reforms -- when citizens, especially young people, in other countries have jobs and can choose their own leaders and have their human rights and dignity upheld -- that can help reduce the appeal of violent extremism.



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We now have hope of averting the worst effects of climate change and the instability that would threaten our national security because American leadership helped rally the world and forge the most ambitious agreement in history to fight climate change.

So if we're going to seize the possibilities of our time, we have to use all these tools, and we have to have the courage to chart new paths. Because we negotiated with Iran and enforced strong sanctions, we reached a deal that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb -- and we did it without firing a shot. With diplomacy, not war. We put aside 50 years of failed policies, and now we're seeing Americans returning to Cuba and the Cuban people looking to us, and having new hope for the future. Four decades after the conflict between us, Vietnam and America are forging a new partnership, showing the world that peace is better than war.

And perhaps no element of our power is more enduring than the example that we set ourselves -- the values we live as a nation and as individuals. That's how we won the Cold War -- not just with the strength of our arms, but with the power of our ideas, the power of our example. It's how we defend our nation -- including our refusal to torture -- because America doesn't just insist that other countries respect human rights, we have to uphold them, as well, and lead the way. It's how we treat those we capture. It's one of the reasons we have to close the prison at Guantanamo -- because America has to stand for rule of law.

We live our values when our military, like America itself, truly welcomes the talents of all people. We're stronger when our gay and lesbian cadets and troops can serve their country -- a country they love -- without hiding who they love. We're stronger when cadets -- like Wasim Soomro and Ismail Baomy and James Salem -- know that we celebrate their service as proud, patriotic Muslim Americans who are also serving in our Armed Forces.

And on this 40th anniversary of the first female cadets arriving at this Academy, we are stronger because General Johnson leads this institution; because Air Force General Lori Robinson leads Northern Command -- our nation's first female combatant commander; and because all combat positions in our military are now open to women like you. We're stronger because of it.



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So there you have it -- a few thoughts from your Commander-in-Chief on how to keep our military strong and our nation secure. We can never know what the future holds. But in the not-so-distant future, when I'm no longer President, I will sleep well at night because I know that men and women like you serve to keep us free.

Take care of each other. Take care of those under your command. And as long as you keep strong that Long Blue Line, stay true to the values you've learned here -- integrity, service before self, excellence -- do this and I'm confident that we will always remain one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Congratulations, Class of 2016.

God bless you all.

God bless the United States of America.