Commencement Address By
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At The U. S. Air Force Academy
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Here in Colorado Springs on this June morning the members of this class receive their academic degrees and at the same time, for the overwhelming majority, their commissions in the United States Air Force. On so auspicious an occasion I am honored to be your speaker. I take pleasure in welcoming you into your leadership roles, not only into the Air Force, but into the nation's entire military establishment. That establishment must, of course, operate as a smoothly functioning, coordinated entity – and in this larger entity the Air Force represents a critical part of a mutually supporting whole.

Commencement, as the name implies, is an occasion for looking forward – as well as for looking backwards with some satisfaction on four years of trials and accomplishments. It just provides an occasion for hard thinking about the future – as well as an opportunity for nostalgia and rejoicing.

I believe that we can leave the organization and conduct of the festivities of the occasion to the private enterprise of the members of the class. Therefore I can concentrate my attention on the hard thinking about the future of yourselves, the Air Force, and the nation.

In looking toward the future one must consider the external world, the role of the United States in that world and the effectiveness of its arrangements and attitudes, and finally, so indispensably, your own set of responsibilities.

Let me start with the external world. In this matter it is incumbent upon you, as citizens and as officers, not to substitute illusion for hope. Indeed it does remain our hope that the many nations can achieve their goals through cooperation rather than through conflict. Yet, we should recognize that this world is neither one from which we can retreat, nor an abode we find particularly hospitable. Lacking the laws and institutions that shape the life of an individual nation, the external world has created far too many opportunities for the unrestrained use, indeed the abuse, of power. Until the nations of the world agree upon and truly accept common purposes in institutions, it will be necessary for this nation to retain the instruments of military power for the preservation of the values that it holds dear.

Historically Americans have viewed power ambivalently, believing that stability and justice should characterize the relations between nations in the absence of the use of force. Nonetheless, in the absence of common purposes and institutions that degree of stability has proved unattainable, and for the foreseeable future power

will remain an indispensable, though hopefully tacit, element in the maintenance of a stable world order.

To become more precise about the existing distribution of world power, two nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, sometimes referred to as the superpowers are preeminent. In a military sense, the world retains most of the trappings of bipolarity. Given that reality, the United States remains the indispensable counterweight in the international equilibrium to the unfettered exercise by the Soviet Union of its very considerable strength. Americans have not been altogether happy with this development in terms of power and responsibility. They have been equivocal about American preeminence – and particularly about the responsibilities imposed upon them by this preeminence. Nonetheless, whether we be resigned to or we cheerfully embrace these responsibilities, there is today no adequate substitute for the United States as a mainstay and maintainer of the community of free states.

In our relations with the other superpower we pursue both stability and the relaxation of tension. But given the ideological differences and the contrast between our own social order and that of the Soviets, the reduction of tension cannot be quickly transformed into the elimination of tension.

The equation of power retains its ultimate significance. And it will do so until such time as the Soviet Union accepts the permanence and legitimacy of western social order. When the Soviet Union ceases to regard peaceful coexistence – Lenin's phrase invariably employed in place of "detente" – as something more than an altered form of the ideological struggle and a different phase of the class war, we may ultimately reach a common acceptance of the meaning of international stability. Until such time, however, power will remain the ultimate arbiter of international developments and the power balance will be essential to the preservation of stability. Détente itself, which we actively pursue, will by necessity remain undergirded by equilibrium of force.

Such are the realities, which for the indefinite future will establish the framework for America's role and for your own responsibilities. To a greater or lesser extent we can fail in our obligations, but it is not in their power to alter the hard cold facts.

Yet, we must also recognize the psychological setting has altered since the United States inherited the responsibilities in the wake of World War II. Americans are no longer as enthusiastic about their international role as they were at the time of the Marshall plan, or the founding of NATO, or the response to Sputnik, or the Kennedy inaugural address. Other states outside of the communist orbit no longer treat American leadership with acclaim. Familiarity has led them to become, at least, more restless, bored or unappreciative. So as we proceed on our course, we do so with less zest, with less of the crusading impulse – while recognizing that the task has become, if anything, more difficult.

In the last century, in his monumental Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville identified as the great weakness of democracies, their tendency towards inconsistency and inconstancy in foreign policy – and thereby posed for us our continuing and greatest challenge:

> "I do not hesitate to say that it is especially in the conduct of their foreign relations that democracies appear to be decidedly inferior to other governments.
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> "… A democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience."

There, gentlemen, stand de Tocqueville's challenge. How stands the nation for responding to that challenge?

For sometime the country has to all appearances been in flux. The changes in attitude reflect a widespread failure of moral stamina in Western societies as much as the specific disputes within this country over the Vietnam War. But I use the word "appearances" advisedly in order to stress the surface aspects of such developments. Beneath the surface there remains in the United States a deep-seated solidarity. Despite the corrosive effects of the events of the last decade, our American society remains a highly resilient one – perhaps preeminent so among the nations of the world.

But this deeper solidarity can readily remain undisturbed. If there is one thing about the American society, it is a tendency to over-dramatize. Headlines (pushing the crisis of the week), the compression of reality in TV summaries, all serve to titillate the reader or viewer. There is typically a quest for novelty.

Yet despite the proclivity to over-dramatize, the opportunity for novelty in responsible policy towards the international order (or the domestic social frame-work) is limited. The role of the United States is to a large degree shaped by external forces to which we may react – or fail to react. The zest for our international role may well have diminished, but that will not permit us to abandon our burdens. What Mr. Dooley said with respect to divorce on Archery Road many years ago has a certain relevancy today to America's continuing foreign involvement:

> "Up here whin a marrid couple get to th' pint where tis impossible f'r thim to go on livin' together they go on livin' together."

Nonetheless, the restlessness, the turmoil, the change in attitudes within the United States are not all superficial. There has been an erosion of trust – in government, in the bonds that hold together the society, in the goodness of the

social order. Confidence must be restored, but the rebuilding effort will require time. Concurrently there has been a decline in discipline and order and in dedication with a consequent rise in self-indulgence. In social terms these are harmful developments. It will be your responsibility and your privilege through your lives and your activities to help reverse these tendencies.

The military services provide an example of discipline and order to which the public can repair during a period of turbulence and of individualism gone awry. There is or should be a natural curb on self-indulgence. There is a sense of calling and of dedication. The example that is set will be welcome. For despite all of the superficial talk about variable lifestyles, at base any society recognizes the amount of flexibility allowed to human beings within a reasonable social order is limited.

Many of these issues are implicit in the expression, Duty, Honor, Country, the motto of a sister institution in the east about which your instructors may or may not have informed you. In a skeptical age such phrases are too frequently dismissed as high flown. They are not high flown; they are filled with high purpose. Duty, Honor, Country, indeed go to the very heart of a stable and healthy social order. Full restoration of a healthy body politic remains a profound need for this country. By your dedication and by your example, I trust, you shall make a major contribution to that end.

For the moment it remains necessary to struggle against a widespread malaise and sourness. For in the long run a healthy society must have a sense of national purpose to which the individuals that compose it can relate. The achievement of that sense of national purpose is an obligation of all of us, but it is particularly an obligation of those who have elected to serve in the nation's military establishment.

Indeed this is intended and embodied in the initial words of your Commissions Second Lieutenants: "… reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities…" I have every confidence that the years ahead through your efforts and the efforts of countless others will bring a restoration of model stamina and an abiding trust the values of Western civilization.

The underlying strength and resiliency of this society is sufficient to the task. We shall not fail, for if we should fail the inevitable drift would make the words of William Butler Yates depressingly relevant to our condition:

> "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,…
> "The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> "Are full of passionate intensity."

A grim vision, but one which, with your help, will not materialize.

Gentlemen, Congratulations and Godspeed.