

Commencement Address at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado

May 23, 2012

The President. Thank you so much. Please be seated. Good morning, everybody!

Audience members. Good morning!

The President. It is wonderful to be at the United States Air Force Academy on such a spectacular day, and it is a privilege to join you in honoring the class of 2012. [Applause] I want to thank Secretary Donley for his introduction, but more importantly, for his leadership.

Generals Gould, Clark, and Born; Academy faculty and staff; the Governor, Hickenlooper; Members of Congress; distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen—I especially want to acknowledge a graduate of this Academy who has kept our Air Force strong through a time of great challenge, a leader I've relied on and for whom today is his final commencement as Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz. Norty, Suzie, we could not be prouder of you, and we are grateful for 39 years of extraordinary service to our Nation. And although he is not with us today, I'm proud to have nominated another Academy graduate, General Mark Welsh, as the next Chief of Staff.

Now, this is my second visit to the Academy. I was here in the summer of 2008, and you were getting ready to head out to Jacks Valley. So I was proud to be here when you began this journey, and I thought I'd come back and help you celebrate at the end. [Laughter] It's great to be back at a school that has produced so many of the airmen I've known as President.

Every day, I rely on outstanding Academy graduates who serve at the White House. Some of you know that photo from the Situation Room on the day we delivered justice to bin Laden. You can see, right next to me, a great leader of our Special Operations forces, General Brad Webb.

Last month, I was able to present the Commander in Chief Trophy to Coach Calhoun and the Fighting Falcons for the 2d straight year, a record 18th time. And of course, every time I step on Air Force One, I count on Academy graduates like my pilot today, Colonel Scott Turner. Now, I was going to tell you a joke about Scott, but he's my ride home. So I'm going to have to keep it to myself. [Laughter]

Cadets, you distinguished yourselves as leaders before you ever stepped foot on the Terrazzo. And when you arrived, I know your upper classmen gave you quite a welcome. They let you experience the joy of the "Beast," the pleasure of "Recognition." They made you experts on filling out forms. I only ask that you resist the temptation to rate my speech: "fast, neat, average, friendly, good-good." [Laughter]

But you survived. In you, we see the values of integrity and service and excellence that will define your lives. And I know you couldn't have made it without the love and support of your moms and dads and brothers and sisters and grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles, cousins. So give them all a big round of applause.

This Academy is one of the most demanding academic institutions in America. And you have excelled. I'm told you have set at least three Academy records: the largest number of graduates ever to go directly on to graduate school; the largest number of female graduates in

Academy history. *[Applause]* You will follow in the footsteps of General Janet Wolfenbarger, who I was proud to nominate as the first female four-star general in Air Force history.

And of course, your final and perhaps most impressive distinction: breaking the world's record for the largest game of dodgeball. Three thousand participants, 30 hours, I didn't know that was possible. *[Laughter]* Of course, you are also the class that snuck into the superintendent's office and moved all the furniture into your dorm rooms, which does bring me to some important business. In keeping with longstanding tradition, I hereby grant amnesty to all cadets serving restrictions and confinements for minor offenses. Of course, I leave it up to General Gould to define minor. *[Laughter]*

Cadets, this is the day you finally become officers in the finest Air Force in the world. Like generations before you, you'll be charged with the responsibility of leading those under your command. Like classes over the past 10 years, you graduate in a time of war, and you may find yourselves in harm's way. But you will also face a new test, and that's what I want to talk to you about today.

Four years ago, you arrived here at a time of extraordinary challenge for our Nation. Our forces were engaged in two wars. Al Qaida, which had attacked us on 9/11, was entrenched in their safe havens. Many of our alliances were strained, and our standing in the world had suffered. Our economy was in the worst recession since the Great Depression. Around the world and here at home, there were those that questioned whether the United States still had the capacity for global leadership.

Today, you step forward into a different world. You are the first class in 9 years that will graduate into a world where there are no Americans fighting in Iraq. For the first time in your lives, and thanks to Air Force personnel who did their part, bin—Usama bin Laden is no longer a threat to our country. We've put Al Qaida on the path to defeat. And you are the first graduates since 9/11 who can clearly see how we'll end the war in Afghanistan.

So what does all this mean? When you came here 4 years ago, there were some 180,000 American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've now cut that number by more than half. And as more Afghans step up, more of our troops will come home while achieving the objective that led us to war in the first place and that is defeating Al Qaida and denying them safe haven. So we aren't just ending these wars, we are doing so in a way that makes us safer and stronger.

Today we pay tribute to all our extraordinary men and women in uniform for their bravery, for their dedication. Those who gave their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan to make this progress possible, including 16 graduates of this Academy, we honor them. We will always honor them.

For a decade, we have labored under the dark cloud of war. And now, we can see a light, the light of a new day on the horizon. So the end of these wars will shape your service, and it will make our military stronger. Ten years of continuous military operations have stretched our forces and strained their families. Going forward, you'll face fewer deployments. You'll have more time to train and stay ready. That means you'll be better prepared for the full range of missions you face.

And ending these wars will also ensure that the burden of our security no longer falls so heavily on the shoulders of our men and women in uniform. As good as you are, you can't be expected to do it alone. There are many sources of American power: diplomatic, economic, and the power of our ideals. And we've got to use them all. And the good news is, today we are.

Around the world, the United States is leading once more. From Europe to Asia, our alliances are stronger than ever. Our ties with the Americas are deeper. We're setting the agenda in the region that will shape our long-term security and prosperity like no other: the Asia-Pacific.

We're leading on global security: reducing our nuclear arsenal with Russia, even as we maintain a strong nuclear deterrent; mobilizing dozens of nations to secure nuclear materials so they never fall into the hands of terrorists; rallying the world to put the strongest sanctions ever on Iran and North Korea, which cannot be allowed to threaten the world with nuclear weapons.

We are leading economically: forging trade pacts to create new markets for our goods; boosting our exports, stamped with three proud words: Made in America. We're expanding exchanges and collaborations in areas that people often admire most about America: our innovation, our science, our technology.

We're leading on behalf of human dignity and on behalf of freedom: standing with the people of the Middle East and North Africa as they seek their rights; preventing a massacre in Libya with an international mission in which the United States and our Air Force led from the front.

We're leading global efforts against hunger and disease. And we've shown our compassion, as so many airmen did, in delivering relief to our neighbors in Haiti when they were in need and to our Japanese allies after the earthquake and tsunami.

Because of this progress, around the world, there is a new feeling about America. I see it everywhere I go, from London and Prague to Tokyo and Seoul, to Rio and Jakarta. There's a new confidence in our leadership. And when people around the world are asked which country do you most admire, one nation comes out on top: the United States of America.

Of course, the world stage is not a popularity contest. As a nation, we have vital interests, and we will do what is necessary always to defend this country we love, even if it's unpopular. But make no mistake: How we're viewed in the world has consequences for our national security and for your lives.

See, when other countries and people see us as partners, they're more willing to work with us. It's why more countries joined us in Afghanistan and Libya. It's why nations like Australia are welcoming our forces who stand side by side with allies and partners in the South Pacific. It's why Uganda and its African neighbors have welcomed our trainers to help defeat a brutal army that slaughters its citizens.

I think of the Japanese man in the disaster zone who upon seeing our airmen delivering relief, said: "I never imagined they could help us so much." I think of the Libyans who protected our airman when he ejected over their town because they knew America was there to protect them. And in a region where we've seen burning of American flags, I think of all the Libyans who were waving American flags.

Today, we can say with confidence and pride the United States is stronger and safer and more respected in the world, because even as we've done the work of ending these wars, we've laid the foundation for a new era of American leadership. And now, cadets, we have to build it. We have to build on it; you have to build on it.

Let's start by putting aside the tired notion that says our influence has waned or that America is in decline. We've heard that talk before. During the Great Depression, when

millions were unemployed and some believed that other economic models offered a better way, there were those who predicted the end of American capitalism. Guess what: They were wrong. We fought our way back. We created the largest middle class in history and the most prosperous economy the world has ever known.

After Pearl Harbor, some said, the United States has been reduced to a third-rate power. Well, we rallied. We flew over the Hump and took island after island. We stormed the beaches and liberated nations. And we emerged from that war as the strongest power on the face of the Earth.

After Vietnam and the energy crisis of the 1970s, some said America had passed its high point. But the very next decade, because of our fidelity to the values we stand for, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and liberty prevailed over the tyranny of the cold war.

As recently as the 1980s, with the rise of Japan and the Asian Tigers, there were those who said we had lost our economic edge. But we retooled. We invested in new technologies. We launched an information revolution that changed the world.

After all this, you would think folks understand a basic truth: Never bet against the United States of America. And one of the reasons is that the United States has been, and will always be, the one indispensable nation in world affairs. It's one of the many examples of why America is exceptional. It's why I firmly believe that if we rise to this moment in history, if we meet our responsibilities, then—just like the 20th century—the 21st century will be another great American Century. That's the future I see. That's the future you can build.

I see an American century because we have the resilience to make it through these tough economic times. We're going to put America back to work by investing in the things that keep us competitive: education and high-tech manufacturing, science and innovation. We'll pay down our deficits, reform our Tax Code, and keep reducing our dependence on foreign oil. We need to get on with nation-building here at home. And I know we can because we're still the largest, most dynamic, most innovative economy in the world. And no matter what challenges we may face, we wouldn't trade places with any other nation on Earth.

I see an American century because you are part of the finest, most capable military the world has ever known. No other nation even comes close. Yes, as today's wars end, our military and our Air Force will be leaner. But as Commander in Chief, I will not allow us to make the mistakes of the past. We still face very serious threats. As we've seen in recent weeks, with Al Qaida in Yemen, there are still terrorists who seek to kill our citizens. So we need you to be ready for the full range of threats. From the conventional to the unconventional, from nations seeking weapons of mass destruction to the cell of terrorists planning the next attack, from the old danger of piracy to the new threat of cyber, we must be vigilant.

And so, guided by our new defense strategy, we'll keep our military and our Air Force fast and flexible and versatile. We will maintain our military superiority in all areas: air, land, sea, space, and cyber. And we will keep faith with our forces and our military families.

And as our newest veterans rejoin civilian life, we will never stop working to give them the benefits and opportunities that they have earned, because our veterans have the skills to help us rebuild America, and we have to serve them as well as they have served us.

I see an American century because we have the strongest alliances of any nation. From Europe to Asia, our alliances are the foundation of global security. In Libya, all 28 NATO allies played a role, and we were joined by partners in the air from Sweden to the Gulf States. In

Afghanistan, we're in a coalition of 50 allies and partners. Today, Air Force personnel are serving in 135 nations, partnering, training, building their capacity. This is how peace and security will be upheld in the 21st century: more nations bearing the costs and responsibilities of leadership. And that's good for America. It's good for the world. And we're at the hub of it, making it happen.

I see an American century because no other nation seeks the role that we play in global affairs and no other nation can play the role that we play in global affairs. That includes shaping the global institutions of the 20th century to meet the challenges of the 21st. As President, I've made it clear: The United States does not fear the rise of peaceful, responsible emerging powers. We welcome them, because when more nations step up and contribute to peace and security, that doesn't undermine American power, it enhances it.

And when other people in other countries see that we're rooting for their success, it builds trust and partnerships that can advance our interests for generations. It makes it easier to meet common challenges, from preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to combating climate change. And so we seek an international order where the rights and responsibilities of all nations and peoples are upheld and where countries thrive by meeting their obligations and they face consequences when they don't.

I see an American century because more and more people are reaching toward the freedoms and values that we share. No other nation has sacrificed more—in treasure, in the lives of our sons and daughters—so that these freedoms could take root and flourish around the world. And no other nation has made the advancement of human rights and dignity so central to its foreign policy. And that's because it's central to who we are as Americans. It's also in our self-interest because democracies become our closest allies and partners.

Sure, there will always be some governments that try to resist the tide of democracy, who claim theirs is a better way. But around the world, people know the difference between us. We welcome freedom to speak, to assemble, to worship, to choose your leaders. They don't. We welcome the chance to compete for jobs and markets freely and fairly. They don't. When fundamental human rights are threatened around the world, we stand up and speak out. And they don't.

We know that the sovereignty of nations cannot strangle the liberty of individuals. And so we stand with the student in the street who demands a life of dignity and opportunity. We stand with women everywhere who deserve the same rights as men. We stand with the activists unbowed in their prison cells and the leaders in parliament who's moving her country towards democracy. We stand with the dissident who seeks the freedom to say what he pleases and the entrepreneur who wants to start a business without paying a bribe and all those who strive for justice and dignity. For they know, as we do, that history is on the side of freedom.

And finally, I see an American century because of the character of our country, the spirit that has always made us exceptional. That simple yet revolutionary idea, there at our founding and in our hearts ever since, that we have it in our power to make the world anew, to make the future what we will. It is that fundamental faith, that American optimism, which says no challenge is too great, no mission is too hard. It's the spirit that guides your class: "Never falter, never fail."

That is the essence of America, and there's nothing else like it anywhere in the world. It's what's inspired the oppressed in every corner of the world to demand the same freedoms for themselves. It's what's inspired generations to come to our shores, renewing us with their

energy and their hopes. And that includes a fellow cadet, a cadet graduating today, who grew up in Venezuela, got on a plane with a one-way ticket to America, and today is closer to his dream of becoming an Air Force pilot: Edward Camacho. Edward said what we all know to be true: "I'm convinced that America is the land of opportunity."

You're right, Edward. That is who we are. That's the America we love: always young, always looking ahead to that light of a new day on the horizon. And, cadets, as I look into your eyes as you join that long blue line, I know you will carry us even farther and even higher. And with your proud service, I'm absolutely confident that the United States of America will meet the tests of our time. We will remain the land of opportunity. And we will stay strong as the greatest force for freedom and human dignity that the world has ever known.

May God bless you. May God bless the class of 2012, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:29 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Michael C. Gould, USAF, superintendent, Brig. Gen. Richard M. Clark, USAF, commandant of cadets, and Brig. Gen. Dana H. Born, USAF, dean of the faculty, U.S. Air Force Academy; Gov. John W. Hickenlooper of Colorado; Suzanne Schwartz, wife of Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, USAF; and Troy Calhoun, head coach, U.S. Air Force Academy football team.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO, commencement address.

Locations: Colorado Springs, CO.

Names: Born, Dana H.; Calhoun, Troy; Camacho, Edward; Clark, Richard M.; Donley, Michael B.; Gould, Michael C.; Hickenlooper, John W.; Schwartz, Norton A.; Schwartz, Suzanne; Turner, Scott; Webb, M. Bradley; Welsh, Mark A.; Wolfenbarger, Janet C.

Subjects: ; Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Air Force, Department of the : Air Force Academy, U.S.; Air Force, Department of the : Chief of Staff ; Air Force, Department of the : Chief of Staff-designate; Air Force, Department of the : Secretary; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Nonproliferation efforts; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Security; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia; Australia : Defense relationship with U.S.; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Colorado : Governor; Colorado : President's visits; Colorado : U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs; Commerce, international : U.S. exports :: Expansion; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Energy : Foreign sources; Environment : Climate change ; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Democratization; Foreign policy, U.S. : Diplomatic efforts, expansion; Haiti : U.S. assistance; Iran : International and U.S. sanctions; Iraq : Relations with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Japan : U.S. assistance; Libya : NATO, role; Libya : No-fly zone :: U.S. military forces; Middle East : Democracy efforts; North Africa : Democracy efforts; North Korea : International and U.S. sanctions; Russia : Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with U.S., expansion; Science and technology : Research and development; Sports : Football; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks;

Uganda : Lord's Resistance Army insurgent group; Uganda : Security cooperation with U.S.;
Veterans : Service and dedication; Yemen : Terrorist attacks.

DCPD Number: DCPD201200416.