

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

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

*June 1, 2023*

*The President.* Well, hello, Falcons!

*Audience members.* Hello!

*The President.* Big day!

It's great to be back at the Air Force Academy, at the altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level—far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis. [*Laughter*]

I figured I should say that so my Air Force One pilots, Colonel Kirkland, class of 1999, and Colonel Donnelly, class of '01, make sure they are willing to take me back to DC. [*Laughter*] I also brought with me today my Air Force and Space Force Military Aides, Lieutenant Colonel Jon Roe, class of '07, Lieutenant Colonel Ann Hughes, class of '08.

These officers travel the world with me, demonstrating—and I mean this sincerely—demonstrating the values of this institution every single day. It's no exaggeration to say I trust my life through Academy graduates. And some of my team members have trusted their lives through academy cadets.

A few months ago, I called to speak to my National Security Adviser, who was out here. But I was told he was unavailable. Turns out, Firstie Andrew Dever had him out doing loops and barrel rolls in a glider. I asked if I could do that today. And the Secret Service said, "No, we'll have to shoot it down." [*Laughter*]

Look, thank you, Colonel Clark—Lieutenant Colonel—Lieutenant General Clark, and to all the faculty and staff here at the Academy for your dedication and commitment in shaping the next generation of American air power and space power.

And thank you to all the parents and families and sponsor families out there in the stands. You've supported these cadets throughout their lives. You taught them how to stand up, never bow, never bend, never yield. You inspired them to put integrity first, to choose service over self—it sounds like hyperbole, but it's literally what you did—to pursue excellence in all they do. But I know you're bursting with pride at what they've already accomplished.

So, graduates, give your families a round of applause. Stand up and give them a round of applause. Show them your appreciation. I think they're excited.

*Audience member.* We love you—[*inaudible*]!

*The President.* The only thing your moms and dads are saying is, "I wish I could have paid for this education." [*Laughter*] Every other graduation I do—and I've done some—a lot of graduations—college graduations—I usually say: "Parents, today you all get a pay raise. No more tuition."

But, Secretary Kendall, General Brown, General Saltzman, thank you for leading our Air Force and our Space Force to take on the missions that most matter—most matter—for today and the future so we can continue to maintain air and space superiority just as we have in every U.S. conflict in this century.

But, graduates, you're not just commissioning into the Air Force and the Space Force, you are commissioning into a Joint Force. One thing working more closely together across the service branches than ever before in new ways to deter, if necessary, defeat every threat to our Nation.

Last week, I was proud—and I mean it sincerely—to nominate your Air Force Chief, General C.Q. Brown, Jr., the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Stand up, General. General, our country thanks you. And I look forward to working with you as Chairman.

And these graduates will have the additional pride of starting their careers of service led by, General that might say, a butt-kicking American airman. I think you used that phrase. *[Laughter]*

Class of 2023——

*Audience members.* Thor!

*The President.* All right, man. You'd better.

This is a day you've worked hard to reach. Think back to that first day of Basic when the bus dropped you off at the Footprints. You didn't know what the hell would lie ahead. Maybe you were wondering what exactly you'd gotten yourself into.

And then, after a few days of acclimating, getting yelled at nonstop by your cadre, hearing those words that meant it would only get worse—quote, "PT ban has been lifted." *[Laughter]* As if that's a good thing, right? *[Laughter]* "The PT ban has been lifted." *[Laughter]*

Marching down to Jack's, building tent city, even sweeping the dirt to make it look like there were hallways. You know, before making it past the Assault Course Fall and Assault Course Nunez—Nuñez. And I tell you what—you're all crazy. But at any rate—*[laughter]*—no, I'm only kidding.

Remember—remember—the pride you felt joining the Flying Wedge in the T-Zo, the first time during the Acceptance Day parade, only to face an even more difficult challenge when the schoolyear began: academics.

It wasn't all pushups and cramming for prog week, though to set the Guinness Book of Records—World Records—most simultaneous pushups—there had to be an enormous amount of pushups.

Beyond you, beyond—but all of you—I think you had some fun along the way. Maybe a good use of your Epic Passes. *[Laughter]* That would be reason enough to join. *[Laughter]* Had a few steaks and tortellini dinners to celebrate commitment and job drops.

I got to see some of you at the White House a few weeks ago to celebrate winning the Commander in Chief Trophy for the 21st time.

When I was graduating from high school 300 years ago—*[laughter]*—I applied to the Naval Academy. And I was picked by the Senator—there's two ways Senators can pick. You can pick individually, or they can name 10 people and let the Academy choose. And I was a relatively good football player, so I had a shot.

And I remember the day that a guy name Steve Dunning, from my class, was also nominated. We drove up. It was about 7 in the morning. We were going to drive down to Annapolis. And I had just heard the night before: They had a halfback named Joe Bellino, won the Heisman Trophy, and a quarterback named Roger Staubach. I went to Delaware. *[Laughter]*

The Blue Horizons rocketry team managed to send the Superintendent's flight cap all the way to space. *[Laughter]* I don't know whether he knew it or not, but—even more impressive, you got it back, some 70 miles away.

Of course, there may also have been achievements of less sterling nature. Maybe you had to do a few tours. Maybe you're one of the cadets who decided to enjoy the view from the top of the Chapel in the Box.

So, before I forget, since I was at one of those schools, at a State university, I found myself in a little bit of trouble a couple times. I really wish that a Commander in Chief had spoken at my graduation, because I have the power to hereby waive any confinements and restrictions of minor cadet disciplinary systems violations. They're waived. And, man—I wish that my commencement speaker had that power.

Look—[laughter]—after 4 long years, you pushed to the limits and forged into leaders of character. And after finally getting to jump into the fountain, you commission as a Second Lieutenant of the United States Air Force and the United States Space Force, part of the greatest—and this is not hyperbole—you're part of the greatest fighting force in the history of the world.

That is the truth. That's the God's truth. That's not an exaggeration. We have the finest military in the history of the world.

And you have earned it. And this day is the day to celebrate. And as your Commander in Chief, I'm honored to be here as you take on the duties of serving and defending our Nation.

In the years to come, you'll have even more asked of you. You'll take on greater responsibilities, and you'll be challenged even beyond everything you've yet experienced.

But you have those mountains. You leave them as you look—I'm sure you're going to be thinking about this a lot as you're moving through your careers. As you leave these mountains where the air is rare, you're going to take with you the confidence that your years have prepared you for whatever is ahead.

After all, your time at this proud institution is defined by so much history, so much tradition, and marked by significant change, as was referenced earlier. Unlike—and overcome time and again to reorient yourself together with your squadron and your wing and find new ways to soar.

As been mentioned already, when COVID hit during the fourth—your 4-degree year, you had to—excuse me—you had to rapidly redeploy back to your homes and learn new ways to study and maintain camaraderie during "COVID-cation."

And by the way, I wonder how many of you had to kick your brother out of your room when you went back.

But all kidding aside, recognition may have been cut short, but it came back in the fall. You did the Run to the Rock. You earned the prop and wings, just like every cadet before you.

Resilience, creativity, endurance, commitment—these have been essential parts of your unique Academy training. And you're going to need those qualities as you continue your careers because the world you are graduating into is not only changing rapidly, the pace of change is accelerating as well.

We are seeing proliferating global challenges, from Russia's aggression and brutality in Europe to our competition with China, and a whole hell of a lot in between—from growing instability to food insecurity to natural disasters, all of which are being made worse by the existential threat of climate change.

I don't hear many of my friends anymore saying there's no climate change. They've finally figured it out. We've been trying to push that since 1981.

But we are seeing engaging technology—emerging technologies all—AI—from AI and 3D printing—that could change the character of conflict itself. They're not going to be easy decisions, guys.

I met in the Oval Office—in my office with 12 leading—no, excuse me—8 leading scientists in the area of AI. Some are very worried that AI can actually overtake human thinking and planning. So we've got a lot to deal with—an incredible opportunity, but a lot to deal with.

We're also working across multiple domains, developing new capabilities, like our new next-gen B-21 Raider. And we're—you're going to be flying that sucker.

And we are going to count on you to keep us at the forefront of air and space dominance, enabling an entire Joint Force to be stronger.

Graduates, you've made a noble choice to lead a life of service. Now you also shoulder a great privilege and a mighty responsibility: leadership. Yes, leadership, a word often used.

In the years ahead, your airmen and guardians are going to look to you for guidance and inspiration, because the world is going to get more confusing. They'll put their trust in you. And you, in turn, must strive to always be worthy of their confidence. Listen to them. Listen to them.

I've always believed that America is strongest when we lead not only by the example of our power, but by the power of our example. Let me say it again. I've traveled the entire world, been in almost every country. The reason why we're respected so much is not just our power, but the power of our example.

And it matters. It matters.

The same is going to be true in your own experience of leadership. No matter what changes or challenges come, your character, your moral clarity, your capabilities must never waver. Again, not hyperbole: The Nation needs you—genuinely needs you.

Our world stands at an inflection point. I had a professor who used to say an inflection point is when you're driving your car down a highway at 60 miles an hour and suddenly you turn the wheel 10 degrees. You can never get back on the same track you were on before. The decisions we make today are going to determine what the world looks like decades from now.

No graduating class gets to choose the world into which they graduate. Every class enters the history of a nation up to the point that has been written by others. But few classes, once every several generations, enters at a point in our history where they actually have a chance to change—change—the trajectory of the country.

It's the only reason I ran. I said to our speaker, I read his article. That's why when I ran, I said I was running for three purposes, two of which were to restore the character of this country and, two, to unite it.

You'll face that inflection point today, and I know you're going to meet the moment to make sure that the future we're building is one that fundamentally aligns with our values and protects America's interests; to make sure that our skies and orbits remain open and navigable to everyone; to make sure that new technology is used to lift people up to new heights, new opportunities, not hold them down or exploit them; and to make sure that the fundamental rules of the international system we put in place more than seven decades ago to prevent another world war are upheld and strengthened to address new threats.

One of the greatest strengths the United States of America brings to this effort is one of the greatest assets you will harness throughout your careers. It's our unmatched network of alliance and partners—allies and partners.

I've spent the bulk of my first year just reestablishing that, meeting hundreds of hours with our NATO allies and others, those nations who willingly stand beside us to face down threats and solve shared challenges.

You've already gotten some sense of that with the friendships and bonds you've built with the cadets graduating today, who will commission in their home militaries across Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indo-Pacific.

Our partnerships amplify our strength and make us more effective. And don't think our adversaries don't understand it. That's why they work so damn hard to try to split us.

We've sent it—we've said it—we've seen it over and over again, especially in the global support for the brave people of Ukraine as they defended their families and their homes against Russia's brutal assault.

Remember what was said? Putin was certain that NATO would crack, that they would not stand together. We put 40 nations together. The United States has rallied the world to stand strong with Ukraine and defend the values that the American people hold so dear: freedom, sovereignty, democracy, simple dignity.

Working with a coalition of more than 50 nations, we have delivered historic security assistance that has enabled Ukraine to defend itself. I've been there many times before the war, spoke at the Rada. I've been there since the war began.

The United States Air Force and Space Force have been the backbone of that operation, providing airlift capacity and logistical know-how to move artillery, ammunition, fighting vehicles, antitank, and air defense system; providing missile warning space-based ISR, supporting communications.

No other nation in the world—in the whole world—has the enabling capacity we do—and what we have to do to thank you and your immediate predecessors.

Just a few weeks ago, I was with President Zelenskyy in Hiroshima at the G-7. I told him that we'd work with our partners to begin training Ukrainian pilots in Europe on fourth-generation fighter aircraft, including the F-16, so Ukraine can defend itself today and in the future.

The Ukrainian people's iron resolve to live in freedom will never be broken. They are incredible: average women and men fighting, giving their lives for their country and their families.

And the American people's support for Ukraine will not waver. We've—always stand up for democracies—always. I'm going to ask you to contemplate what happens if it wavers and Ukraine goes down. What about Belarus? What about the rest of Eastern Europe?

Look, the G-7 also demonstrated remarkable unity in the world's leading democracies when it comes to China. The United States—I've met with Xi Jinping more than any person—more than any leader in the world, starting back when I was Vice President.

The United States does not seek conflict or confrontation with China. China and the United States should be able to work together where we can to solve some global challenges like climate. But we are prepared for vigorous competition. And we will stand up for our interests, for our friends, and for our values.

With our G-7 partners, we issued a set of shared principles for engaging with China and minimizing the threats to our nations: by bolstering our economic security, resisting economic coercion, countering harmful practices, and protecting a narrow set of advanced technologies critical to our national security by not trading them.

By working together with nations that share the most fundamental values, we multiply one another's strength and firmly fix a course toward our shared vision for the future. In every part of the world, we advanced our partnerships in concrete ways that strengthen the American security.

In the Indo-Pacific, we've deepened our alliance and our trilateral cooperation with Japan and the Republic of Korea, who are now talking together and working together to enhance deterrence against threats in the region, including from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

We've elevated the Quad, bringing together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to advance an Indo-Pacific that's free and open, prosperous and secure. It didn't exist before.

We're delivering on AUKUS, a new strategic partnership that brings the United States closer together with Australia and the United Kingdom, two of our most capable allies.

NATO is more energized and more united than it's been in decades, and it's now even stronger with the accession of our newest ally, Finland, and soon Sweden, in the alliance as soon as possible. *[Applause]* It will happen. I promise you.

We're working with Canada to upgrade NORAD's capabilities and ensure that North America's air defense surveillance systems are the best in the world.

And in just the past 12 months, I've hosted in the United States the leaders of every country in the Western Hemisphere, every country in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. We are a Pacific nation.

These nations may not all agree with us on every issue, but they want to work with us; they choose us, not because of threats or coercion, but because of the common interests we pursue together to make the world a better and safer place for everyone. That—that—is what the United States stands for.

When people around the world see a United States gray tail flying overhead or the stars and stripes on your shoulders, they know what that means no matter where you go: freedom, opportunity, possibilities, hope. It's who we are. It's what we fight for. It's why we choose this path.

So, graduates, as you head out, whether to graduate school or pilot training, to serve as missileers or space operations, scientists or engineers, never forget the sacred oath you swear and the mission you serve is something far, far greater than any person or President. It's our Constitution. It's our country. And it's our enduring American values.

You know, we're the most unique nation in the world. And say, "Well, everybody says"—but we are. We're the only nation in the world formed and based on an idea. An idea. Every other nation in the world is formed based on things like geography, ethnicity, religion.

We're the only nation built on an idea that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights: life, liberty, pursuit of—that's the organizing principle of America.

We haven't always lived up to it, but we never—except on one brief moment—even thought about walking away from it. Generations of our forebears have fought and sacrificed to defend it, sacrifices we honored earlier this week on Memorial Day.

My son was an Army officer, a major; the attorney general who sought permission to go fight with his unit in Iraq for a year. Unfortunately, his hooch was very close to these burn pits, and he came home with stage 4 glioblastoma and died.

I remember looking at him in the bed. This is the God's truth. I hadn't planned on saying this, and maybe I shouldn't. He looked at me and said—and we're talking about war. He said, "Dad"—he was attorney general, odds-on favorite to become the Governor. He said: "Dad, the proudest thing I've ever done in my life is putting on that uniform. The proudest thing."

Just before he passed, he said: "I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid."

That's what you all are made of as well: pride. Pride—not in yourself, but what you're fighting for. It's a sacred charge that you now inherit as well.

This year, we mark the 75th anniversary—this year—of an integrated force, the 75th anniversary of women serving in the force, and the 50th anniversary of an All-Volunteer military. And your class is one of the diverse—most diverse classes in the history of this Academy or any academy to graduate. That's why we're strong. That's why we're who we are. That's why we'll never give up. That's why!

We also recognize that with every step we've taken to harness the full diversity of our Nation, to tap more of our indomitable American spirit, our Armed Forces have only grown stronger, more effective, and more admired. The same is true of this institution.

This year's graduating class is among the most diverse in academy history. You're graduating the highest percentage of women. By the way, I met with the—who are those guys that fly over shortly? You've heard of them, haven't you? Three of them are women. *[Laughter]* So don't screw around, guys. And the highest percentage of minority cadets in history.

You're a strengthening force, a force that depends—depends—on American values, that reflect America itself. And each of you has an obligation to treat the airmen and guardians you lead and everyone you encounter with dignity. Your honor code says, "We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does."

So it's on all of you to root out the scourge of sexual assault and harassment in the military and to never tolerate it among—never tolerate it; to make sure that every member of our Armed Forces, no matter who they are, who they love, feels safe and respected in the ranks.

Class of 2023——

*Audience members.* Thor!

*The President.* ——you've been trained to lead, to set an example of leadership for others. You've been given the skillset to think clearly, to make strategic decisions, and to do what is right, under pressure.

You've earned the trust and respect of your fellow cadets and your instructors. And you are the very embodiment of the American military excellence, and you are ready for anything. Anything.

As I look out today, I give you my word as a Biden: I've never been more optimistic—never been more optimistic—about the future of this country, in no small part because of you. I mean it sincerely.

Four years ago, you arrived as individuals. Today, you're part of a Long Blue Line. Future generations will stand in your footsteps, strive to meet the heights that your—of your expectations, draw inspiration from the example of honor and integrity that you're going to set.

Held aloft by the core values you learned here, our Air Force, our Space Force, our Joint Force, indeed our Nation, is safe and steady hands with all of you.

May God protect you all as you set out on your journeys. And remember—remember: Never bend, never bow, never yield. And remember who we are.

May the Lord guard and guide the ones who fly through great space and sky, and may God protect all those who wear the uniform of the United States of America.

Let us hear us one more time for the class of 2023.

*Audience members.* Thor!

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:29 a.m. at the Falcon Stadium. In his remarks, he referred to National Security Adviser Jacob J. Sullivan; Superintendent of the U.S. Air Force Academy Lt. Gen. Richard M. Clark, USAF; Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall; U.S. Space Force Chief of Space Operations Gen. B. Chance Saltzman, USSF; Roger Staubach, former quarterback, National Football League's Dallas Cowboys; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; President Xi Jinping of China; and Maj. Lauren Schlichting, USAF, slot pilot, Capt. Randi Winther, USAF, executive officer, and Capt. Kaity Toner, USAF, public affairs officer, Air Demonstration Squadron (Thunderbirds).

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*Locations:* Colorado Springs, CO.

*Names:* Brown, Charles Q., Jr.; Clark, Richard M.; Dever, Andrew; Donnelly, Peter; Hughes, Ann L.; Kendall, Frank; Kirkland, Jason; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Roe, Jon; Saltzman, B. Chance; Schlichting, Lauren; Staubach, Roger; Sullivan, Jacob J.; Toner, Toner; Winther, Randi; Xi Jinping; Zelenskyy, Volodymyr.

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