

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York

May 25, 2024

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

General Gilland, Secretary Wormuth, General George, Members of Congress. And by the way, one of the Members of Congress up here, I'm flying up with him, and he's bragging about being from this district and maybe graduated from this academy. Stand up, Ryan. Stand up, Congressman. Fellow graduate right there.

Faculty, staff, soldiers, officers, family, and friends, most of all, West Point Class of 2024: In 1776, British forces had driven General Washington's army out of New York City. The British Navy dominated the coast of New England. If they could control the Hudson, they could cut colonies in half, divide and conquer, a classic strategy.

But General Washington saw it coming. He knew there was a place on the Hudson where the river bent with a plateau overhead. The Americans placed artillery batteries along the river, stretched an iron chain across the water, and built a fort on a plain called West Point.

West Point, George Washington said—[*applause*]. George Washington said West Point was the "key of America." He was right. The British never captured the Hudson. They failed to divide and conquer us. And a few years later, they surrendered at the Battle of Yorktown.

Audience members. Yeah!

The President. You've got it, man.

The most powerful empire in the world defeated by an army of ordinary people driven by the sacred cause of freedom. And I might add, you're about to become full-time members of the most honorable and the most consequential fighting force in the history of the world—that's not hyperbole—of the world. That's the truth.

Ever since, men and women of West Point have stayed true to this mission. And today 1,036 graduates of the class of 2024 will join the Long Gray Line that has never failed us and never, ever will.

Together, you survived the Beast Barracks—[*laughter*—and countless hours of PT. You completed rigorous academics at the—America's first, toughest engineering school in the country. You met the highest standards of discipline.

And of course, no one is perfect. Even Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower were written up from time to time—you know I'm not kidding—[*laughter*—when they were cadets here at West Point. If that sounds familiar to you, maybe I can help you today. In keeping with a longstanding tradition, as Commander in Chief, I absolve all cadets on restriction for minor conduct offenses. [*Laughter*] If you have any questions, the Superintendent can clarify what "minor" means. [*Laughter*]

Of course, your time here wasn't all difficult. The class did plenty of celebrating every time you beat Navy. Now, look, lots of West Point classes have some wins over Navy. But not every class, over a 4-years period, beats Navy 51 times. As they say in Delaware, "You done good."

A few weeks ago, I was honored to present the Commander in Chief's Trophy to the Black Knights at the White House. I told them I don't take sides. But my son Beau was a decorated

major in the United States Army. He spent a year in Iraq. And he always made it clear who he expected the family to root for in the game in Philadelphia. [Laughter]

Parenthetically, I was appointed by my—the fellow I ran against when I was 29 years old to the Naval Academy. I was one of 10. I wanted to play football. And my—the day I was supposed to go down for the interview, a classmate of mine who was also one of the 10 appointed to be chosen from—a kid named Steve Dunning—came to pick me up.

And I had found out 2 days earlier they had a quarterback named Roger Staubach and a halfback named Joe Bellino. I said, "Hell, I'm not going there." [Laughter] I went to Delaware. [Laughter] Not a joke. [Laughter]

And by the way, that same fellow, he was a wonderful man. I had—in our last debate, when I was 29 years old, he was—the first question he was asked at the debate was, "Do you have any regrets, Senator Boggs?" And he said, "No." Then we came to the very end of the debate, where I spoke and then he was to conclude. He stood up, and he said: "You know, I was asked whether I had any regrets. I said no, but I have one: Had Joe Biden gone to the Naval Academy when I appointed him, he'd still have 7 months left on and wouldn't be able to run." [Laughter]

Cadets, as proud as your country is today, your families are even prouder. At R-Day 4 years ago, because of the pandemic, they could not spend the day on post. It was a challenging way to begin the West Point experience. So I'm thrilled today so many of your loved ones get to see you here.

To everyone who helped raise these remarkable young people, this is your day as well. Because we know, as the English poet John Milton wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait." Cadets, it's time for you to stand up now and thank your parents. Stand up, turn, and thank them. You owe them big.

The class of '24 is an extraordinary group. You include the Army's alltime home run leader; athletes who have swum laps around Manhattan Island, which I could never quite figure out, and the son of an Iraqi interpreter for the American forces, one of your class's two Rhodes Scholars.

You hail from all 50 States and 12 countries. Some of you are third-generation West Pointers. Others are the first in your family to join the U.S. Armed Forces. And at least one of you has a twin brother graduating from Annapolis this year. [Laughter]

I tell you what, I don't want to be at that family reunion. [Laughter] Every time you show up to the Army-Navy game, I don't know how the hell you're going to do it. But any rate. [Laughter]

Look, I wish I could praise every single cadet one by one, because you deserve it. You make our entire nation proud, and that's not hyperbole. You do. As your Commander in Chief, let me say again: Congratulations. You've earned every bit of what you've—[inaudible]—going to get today.

Look, the motto of this class, "Like None Before," was an appropriate choice for your class, because you're graduating into a world—as a student of history, I can tell you—"like none before." I've been a Senator since I was 29 years old, never left Government. And, ladies and gentlemen, the world is not only changing rapidly, it's also, the pace of change is accelerating. And the range of missions that our servicemen are carrying out are "like none before" as well.

There's never been a time in history when we've asked our military to do so many different things in so many different places around the world all at the same time.

Right now American soldiers are supporting brave Ukrainians in their fight for freedom. Our soldiers are working around the clock to keep munitions and equipment moving by land, sea, and air. They're training Ukrainians on how to use advanced weapons systems, like HIMARS,

Patriots, and Abrams tanks, and they're sharing lessons in Tactical Combat Casualty Care with Ukrainian medics and surgeons.

There are no American soldiers at war in Ukraine. I'm determined to keep it that way. But we are standing strong with Ukraine, and we will stand with them. We're standing against a man who I've known well for many years, a brutal tyrant. We may not—we—and we will not—we will not walk away.

Putin was certain that NATO would fracture. I remember them—right after being elected President, before—right after I was sworn in, and we talked about this very issue. In the fall, he had tied—that fall, he decided to—look, I shouldn't get into this, probably—[laughter]—because it gets me a little excited. But Putin was certain that NATO would fracture.

I said to him in Switzerland that, "You want the Finlandization of Ukraine; you're going to get the Finlandization—you're going to get the NATO-ization of Europe." He had a brazen vision, which we stepped up and stopped. Instead, today, the greatest defense alliance in the history of the world is stronger than ever. Finland and Sweden are our newest members, and they are tough.

In the Middle East, while we conduct urgent diplomacy to secure an immediate cease-fire that brings hostages home, our Army and Navy have deployed a temporary pier in the—on the Mediterranean in record time to increase lifesaving aid to the Palestinians. The U.S. Air Force has conducted food drops, delivering tens of thousands of meals to the people of Gaza.

In the face of Iran's recent unprecedented attack on Israel, we brought partners together, including Arab nations, to repel the sustained assault. The man running the operation on the ground: General Erik Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command, West Point '88. General Kurilla did a superb job.

I was in the Situation Room with our national security team. He was on the screen from the region. He knew the attack was coming, but we weren't sure precisely when it would begin. Then, at 6:34 p.m., the General said to me, "Mr. President, we just got multiple ballistic missile launches from Iran toward Israel." Six minutes later, he said, "There are 30 missiles in the air." Four minutes after that, he said, "There's 75 missiles in the air." Then he said, "Over 100 missiles in the air."

Under incredible pressure, General Kurilla and the Combined Joint Task Force performed exceptionally from sea, air, and bases nearby. Thanks to the—99 percent of the missiles and drones of Iran never reached their targets because of the quality of our forces. We swiftly ended—[applause]. We swiftly ended what could have been a devastating attack, and we deescalated the conflict, when it easily could have gone the other way.

On the other side of the world, in the Indo-Pacific, we deepened our alliances. We've created new ones, like AUKUS, our new strategic partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom. Or the trilateral cooperation we've forged with Japan and the Republic of Korea that no one thought was possible: two of our allies cooperating on strategic defense thanks to our leadership. We've begun the new trilateral partnership with Japan and the Philippines as well.

We elevated the Quad—together with Japan, India, and Australia—to advance free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. We're standing up for peace and stability and across the Taiwan Straits. And we've depended on our strategic partnership with Vietnam. I wonder if the classes of '74 are here today could have imagined that they were sitting where you were at the same time and right—during Vietnam.

The upshot of all this: Across vastly different regions and very different challenges, our women and men in uniform are hard at work strengthening our alliances, because no country has

allies like ours; investing in deterrence so anyone who thinks they can threaten us thinks again; defending our values by standing up to tyrants; and safeguarding the peace by protecting freedom and openness.

Thanks to the U.S. Armed Forces, we're doing what only America can do as the indispensable nation, the world's only superpower, and the leading democracy in the world. Never forget: America is the strongest when we lead not only by our example of our power, but by the power of our example. You can clap for that.

I want to mention one additional way we've made progress. Every member of our Armed Forces must always be safe and respected in the ranks. For the first time in nearly a decade, rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment have gone down across the Active Duty forces. It's long past time to end the scourge of sexual violence in the military once and for all. And we can do this.

Cadets, make no mistake, there remains a hard-power world. You can't draw any other conclusion when powerful nations try to coerce their neighbors or terrorists attempt evil plots. That's why I'm making historic investments in our military, overhauling our defense industrial base.

For decades, America has had the most powerful military in the world. And that happens because we choose to make it happen. I have always been willing to use force when required to protect our Nation, our allies, our core interests.

And when anyone targets American troops, we will deliver justice to them. That happened earlier this year, when three heroic members of the U.S. Army Reserve were killed in an unmanned drone attack near—in northeast Jordan.

In response, we launched dozens of successful airstrikes against Iran-backed militants. And we'll never forget to honor the memory of those warriors who gave their lives in the fight against terrorism.

Cadets, West Point had made you—has made you leaders of character. In minutes, you'll be United States Army officers. In time, some of you will serve in powerful roles at headquarters, the Pentagon, even in the White House. You'll confront challenges that previous generations of soldiers couldn't imagine.

When that happens, hold fast to your values you learned here at West Point: duty, honor, country. Hold fast to your honor code, which says, quote, "We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate those who do," end of quote. And above all, hold fast to your oath. On your very first day at West Point, you raised your right hands and took an oath, not to a political party, not to a President, but to the Constitution of the United States of America, against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Members of the Long Gray Line have given their lives for that Constitution. They have fought to defend the freedoms that it protects: the right to vote, the right to worship, the right to raise your voice in protest. They have saved and sacrificed to ensure, as President Lincoln said, a "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the Earth."

West Pointers know better than anyone: Freedom is not free. It requires constant vigilance. And for—from the very beginning, nothing is guaranteed about our democracy in America. Every generation has an obligation to defend it, to protect it, to preserve it, to choose it. Now is your turn.

Remember what over a thousand graduates of West Point wrote to the class of 2020, 4 years ago: The oath you've taken here, quote, "has no expiration date," they said. Not for you, not for your country. It's important to your nation now as it's ever been. Keep it, honor it, and live it.

Cadets, let me close with this. In the early days of our Nation, as General Washington said, West Point was the "key of America." Today, you're still the key because of your commitment to protect what makes America "America."

We're unique in the world. We're the only country in the world founded on an idea. Other countries are founded based on geography, ethnicity, religion, or other attributes, but we're the only one founded on an idea—not figuratively, literally. And the idea is, we're all created equal, deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives.

But ideas need defenders to make them real. That's what you, the class of 2024, are all about: defenders of freedom, champions of liberty, guardians—and I mean this—guardians of American democracy.

And just as this historic institution helped make America free over two centuries ago, and just as generations of West Point graduates have kept us free through every challenge and danger, you must keep us free at this time, "like none before."

I know you can. I know you will. For we are the United States of America, and there is nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we do it together.

May God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

Congratulations, class of 2024.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:38 a.m. at the Michie Stadium. In his remarks, he referred to Superintendent of the Lt. Gen. Stephen W. Gilland, USA, Superintendent, U.S. Military Academy; Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth; Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy A. George, USA; Roger Staubach, former quarterback, U.S. Naval Academy football team and National Football League's Dallas Cowboys; Fahad Abdulrazzaq and Isabella Sullivan, graduating cadets named as Rhodes Scholars to pursue study at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom in the fall of 2024; David and Eric Esqueda, brothers from El Paso, TX, 2024 graduates, respectively, of the U.S. Military Academy and U.S. Naval Academy; and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 26.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY, commencement address.

Locations: West Point, NY.

Names: Abdulrazzaq, Fahad; Esqueda, David; Esqueda, Eric; George, Randy A.; Gilland, Stephen W.; Kurilla, Michael E.; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Ryan, Patrick K.; Staubach, Roger; Sullivan, Isabella; Wormuth, Christine E.

Subjects: AUKUS trilateral security partnership; Counterterrorism and homeland security; Defense readiness, improvement efforts; Football; Gaza, humanitarian situation; Gaza, international assistance; Indo-Pacific, economic and security cooperation; Iran, missile and drone attack against Israel ; Iran, regional involvement; Israel, missile and drone attack by Iran; Japan, relations with U.S.; Jordan, attack on U.S. servicemembers; Military families; New York, President's visit; New York, U.S. Military Academy in West Point; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Philippines, relations with U.S.; Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Russia, President; Secretary of the Army; Sexual assault and harassment; South Korea, relations with U.S.; Taiwan, political status with respect to China; U.S. Central Command; U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes; Ukraine, U.S. assistance.

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