

Address at Commencement Exercises at the United States Military Academy

May 27, 1981

General Goodpaster; reverend clergy; General Means [Meyer]; the Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives who are here; the officers on the platform; you, the family, the friends, the Corps and, above all, this graduating class:

Nancy and I consider it a great pleasure to be here today to congratulate you who have successfully completed your education and training at the United States Military Academy. I'm a little self-conscious being introduced as your Commander when I began my military career as a second lieutenant in the Cavalry, the horse Cavalry, that is. [Laughter] I have threatened on occasion that that was the reason I got this job was so that I could reinstitute the horse Cavalry. [Laughter]

But we honor you for the responsibility that you're willing to accept. Today you become officers in the Armed Forces of the United States, guardians of freedom, protectors of our heritage. But more than that you become the keepers of the peace.

Those shrill voices that would have us believe the defenders of our nation are somehow the enemies of peace are as false as they are shrill. A Chinese philosopher, Sun Tzu, 2,500 years ago, said, "Winning a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." A truly successful army is one that because of its strength and ability and dedication will not be called upon to fight, for no one will dare to provoke it.

There have been four wars in my lifetime. None of them came about because the United States was too strong. At the end of World War II we alone were at the peak of our military strength. Our great industrial capacity was untouched by war's destruction, and it was then that in those dark days that Pope Pius XII said, "America has a great genius for great and unselfish deeds. Into the hands of America God has placed an afflicted mankind."

We set out to restore the war-ravaged lands of our erstwhile enemies as well as our friends. We prevented what could have been a retreat into the Dark Ages. Unfortunately another great power in the world was marching to a different drumbeat, creating a society in which everything that isn't compulsory is prohibited. The citizens in that society have little more to say about their government than a prison inmate has to say about the prison administration.

About 10 days ago I addressed the graduating class at the University of Notre Dame. Young men and women of your generation were facing a future in which they wonder what jobs will be available and who their employers will be. You don't have that problem. [Laughter] You know what your job will be, and your employers will be those Notre Dame graduates as well as the rest of your fellow citizens.

Now, of course, they won't be directly and personally in charge. That's left to those of us that they've chosen to represent them -- Secretary Marsh, who is here, Secretary of the Army. But speaking on behalf of all the people, those employers of yours, may I say that we intend that you shall find better working conditions, tools adequate to the tasks you're expected to perform, and pay somewhat more commensurate with the responsibilities you assume than has been the case in recent years.

Now you may have heard rumors to the effect that increasing government spending is not something I'm prone to do, and to tell the truth, there's a certain substance to those rumors. At the same time, I accept without question the words of George Washington: ``To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace." Now, in spite of some things you may have heard, he didn't tell me that personally -- [laughter] -- still, I'm in full agreement and believe that he did say it.

But let me seriously speak about your employers. We've been through a period in which it seemed that we the people had forgotten that government is a convenience of, for, and by the people. And while we were busy with our own affairs, government began to grow beyond the consent of the governed. Its growth was nourished by an ever-larger share of the people's earnings that it took by taxation which became more and more confiscatory. At the same time government neglected one of its prime responsibilities, national security, as it engaged more and more in social experimentation. Our margin of safety in an increasingly hostile world was allowed to diminish, and for a time it seemed that there was an erosion of respect for the honorable profession that you have chosen.

All of this has led to an economic crisis. Deficit spending, an almost trillion dollar debt resulted in runaway inflation, lowered productivity, and great unemployment. And the tools of your trade were given a very low priority.

Well, I'm happy to tell you that the people of America have recovered from what can only be called a temporary aberration. There is a spiritual revival going on in this country, a hunger on the part of the people to once again be proud of America -- all that it is and all that it can be.

Now, the first step in restoring our margin of safety must be the rejuvenation of our economy. A vibrant and expanding economy is necessary if we're to have the research, the technology, and the industry and capacity to provide you with what you need to practice your profession.

Reflecting the will of the people, the government has returned to our long-time tradition of bipartisanship -- not only where national security is concerned but with regard to the economic needs of our people. In recent weeks one could say there were no Democrats or Republicans in Congress -- just Americans.

Yes, there are and will be disagreements, but they are legitimate differences of opinion on how best to reduce government costs, what tax changes will provide incentive to increase productivity, and how best to restore our defense capability. Already the Congress has voted the greatest reduction in the budget ever attempted and, at the same time, has mightily increased the

spending for the military. The argument, if there is any, will be over which weapons, not whether we should forsake weaponry for treaties and agreements.

My good friend Laurence Beilenson authored a book a few years ago called, "The Treaty Trap." It was the result of years of research, and it makes plain that no nation that placed its faith in parchment or paper, while at the same time it gave up its protective hardware, ever lasted long enough to write many pages in history. Now this is not to say that we shouldn't seek treaties and understandings and even mutual reduction of strategic weapons. The search for peace must go on, but we have a better chance of finding it if we maintain our strength while we're searching. Mr. Beilenson has recently authored a new thought-provoking book called "Survival and Peace in the Nuclear Age."

But weaponry alone does not mean security. General George Patton said, "Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory." Now, today we seek to make one change in that statement. It is, "The men and women who follow and the men and women who lead." Now -- I meant to ask the General before I got up here, and I forgot to do it, because I've been given two figures -- I know that there are either 58 or 68 women in this graduating class. And I do know that women do constitute more than 9 percent of the Army today.

The indispensable factor for protection for all that we hold dear is leadership, a leadership of you and young men and women like you, that you offer to this Nation. You will be the individuals who most inspire and lead those who are called upon to do the hard and sometimes thankless job.

There's a writer, James Warner Bellah, sometimes called our Rudyard Kipling because of his stories of our Army on the frontier as we pushed westward. And in one of his stories he described a poignant scene. A commanding officer lay dying on the field of battle. As he passed the command to a younger officer he said, "There may be only one time in your life when your country will call upon you and you will be the only one who can do the nasty job that has to be done -- do it or forever after there will be the taste of ashes in your mouth."

A torch of leadership is being handed to you in this commencement ceremony today, a ceremony that in all this land is duplicated only in the several other service academies. I know that you've learned the principles of leadership here in this historic place. You know that it requires one to command respect of those who follow by deserving that respect, by dedication and total commitment to the defense of our country and all that it represents.

You've had an excellent example to follow. General Goodpaster, who is, I know, an honorary member of your graduating class now, he arrived as Superintendent almost at the same time as you enrolled as plebes, and he retires now as you graduate. He served his country well, retired as a four-star general, but was willing to leave retirement and give up a star to return to West Point.

You are part of a great tradition. It's overused, I know, but the term "the long gray line" is descriptive of the tradition of which you are now a part. In that line have been men who turned defeat into victory, who stood in the breach till citizen armies could be raised. For a time West Point was the nation's principal source of professionally trained engineers. The West was

explored and mapped by members of the long gray line. A West Point graduate helped design the Panama Canal and the Holland Tunnel. Two were Presidents. Two are presently Cabinet members in this administration. Others have been giants of commerce and industry -- Henry du Pont, class of 1833; Robert E. Wood, class of 1900.

Dwight Eisenhower said, "Even in the event of a complete disarmament there is a role for West Point. Even if we just turned our graduates back into the body politic it would be good. The graduates are trained people who understand their duty and who do it."

Six of the astronauts are graduates of West Point, among them the first man to walk in space, Colonel Edward White, who then lost his life in 1967 in a tragic fire that swept the Apollo spacecraft.

But let us look ahead to the force of which you will be an important and significant part. I doubt there will be many surprises, because in a way you've been "Army" for the last 4 years. There's little chance that you'll be like that recruit in World War II who asked in some bewilderment why the Army did certain things in the way it did. And a long-time Regular Army sergeant said, "Well, let me explain it to you, son. If you were in charge of a brand new country and creating an army for that country, you finally got a division organized, what would you call it?" And the recruit said, "Well, I guess I'd call it the 1st Division." "Well," he said, "in the United States Army when they did that, they called it the 2d Division." And he said, "When you understand that, you'll know everything about the Army and why it does things the way -- [laughter] -- --

But our country has a unique tradition among the nations. Unlike the other powers with armies of conscripts, our military was always composed of citizen volunteers. In times past, the standing Army was a skeleton force that expanded in wartime to absorb the draftees, the conscripts. We also counted on a National Guard, a trained reserve to bridge the period when the draftees were undergoing basic training. We must still have that reserve, and we're taking steps to upgrade it to a state of immediate readiness.

We once had the luxury of time provided by the two great oceans -- a luxury we no longer have. At the end of World War II we continued the draft into peacetime even though the peacetime draft was counter to American tradition. We had always believed that only in the most severe national emergency did a government have a claim to mandatory service of its younger citizens.

But we returned to that tradition in 1973 -- a volunteer military. Some proclaimed it a failure from the start. I'm not going to take your time by reciting the pros and cons of the debate, which still goes on, except to say that some express the belief that patriotism alone should be cause enough to serve. Well, George Washington, to quote him again, once said of patriotism: "It must be aided by a prospect of Interest or some reward. For a time it may, of itself push Men to Action; to bear much, to encounter difficulties; but it will not endure unassisted by interest."

Now, it's true that patriotism can't be bought; neither can it be coerced. Any you here today are living proof of that. Obviously you did not choose this profession with the thought of making a fortune. Samuel Johnson, 200 years ago, said, "An officer is much more respected than any other man who has so little money." [Laughter]

Young men and women volunteered for duty in our Armed Forces and then found that too much of their reward was expected to be patriotism. And in recent years even here they were shortchanged. In much of the seventies there was a widespread lack of respect for the uniform, born perhaps of what has been called the Vietnam syndrome. The result was inevitable -- a fall-off of enlistments, but even worse, a drop in reenlistment, resulting in a great loss of experienced noncommissioned officers. The cry for a draft arose to a crescendo.

Well, I still believe there is another way, one more in keeping with our system of rewarding those who work and serve, on a scale commensurate with what we ask of them. I don't suppose we could put an exact price on the sacrifice that we ask of those who guarantee our safety, but one thing is certain: They deserve better than a bare subsistence level.

I have asked Secretary of Defense Weinberger to form a Defense Manpower Task Force to review the entire military manpower question and to make proposals which will increase the effectiveness of the active and reserve all-volunteer forces.

Last year's pay increase was a step in the right direction, but we're asking for another one in the fiscal year that begins October 1st. We seek to channel pay increases and bonuses to those in the most needed skill areas. We're studying proposals for a merit pay system and increased flexibility in personnel practices.

A few years ago the GI bill was eliminated and replaced with a program having fewer benefits. At the same time we were expanding Federal aid to college students. The Federal Government, in effect, provided more benefits to those who were not serving their country and reduced them for those who were. The Defense Manpower Task Force will be studying ways in which we can make enlistment more attractive to the kind of young people we need in our military forces.

Already enlistments are up, and so are reenlistments. And surprisingly -- well, maybe we shouldn't be surprised -- many who have already left the service are now returning. There's also been a decided rise in quality as measured by educational and testing attainment. Something other than pay and benefits contributed to this.

I mentioned earlier the new spirit that is abroad in our land. The era of self-doubt is over. We've stopped looking at our warts and rediscovered how much there is to love in this blessed land. All of us together and you very definitely in the posts you go to can help restore the sense of pride our men and women are entitled to have in wearing the uniform.

Let friend and foe alike be made aware of the spirit that is sweeping across our land, because it means we will meet our responsibility to the free world. Very much a part of this new spirit is patriotism, and with that goes a heartfelt appreciation for the sacrifices of those in uniform.

You are a prime ingredient that keeps us free, that protects all we cherish and hold dear. You can transmit the historic heritage which is in the very air of West Point. The first Purple Heart medal was awarded here. It was the first decoration ever given to an enlisted man.

At Trophy Point I'm told there are links of a great chain that was forged and stretched across the Hudson to prevent the British fleet from penetrating further into the valley. Today you are that chain holding back an evil force that would extinguish the light we've been tending for 6,000 years.

Now, before I finish, there is one thing that I should say on behalf of you directly. And that is that in keeping with what I understand is a tradition, I have asked the Superintendent to grant an amnesty. [Applause] I knew I should have saved that for the last -- [laughter] -- but seriously, I wanted to close with some other remarks.

Almost two decades ago in the sunset of his life, a West Point graduate, Douglas MacArthur, returned to this place to address the Cadet Corps. No one who ever heard him that day can ever forget his call to duty, honor, country, nor his declaration that so long as there was a breath in his body, he would hear the words ``the Corps, the Corps, the Corps."

Do your duty. Keep untarnished your honor, and you of the Corps will preserve this country for yourselves, for all of us, for your children, and for your children's children.

God bless you and keep you.

Note: The President spoke at 10:12 a.m. at the ceremonies, which were held in Michie Stadium on the campus at West Point, N.Y. In his opening remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, Superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, and Gen. Edward C. Meyer, Army Chief of Staff.

Following his remarks, the President awarded the Defense Distinguished Service Medal to General Goodpaster.