

United States Military Academy Commencement
June 1, 2002
Draft #19

General Lennox, Mr. Secretary,
Governor Pataki, Academy staff and
faculty, distinguished guests, families, and
graduates: Thank you for your welcome. I
am especially honored to visit this great
institution in your bicentennial year.

In every corner of America, the words
“West Point” command immediate respect.
This place where the Hudson River bends
is more than a fine institution of learning.
The United States Military Academy is the
guardian of values that have shaped the
soldiers who have shaped the history of the
world.

A few of you have followed in the path of the perfect West Point graduate, Robert E. Lee, who never received a single demerit in four years; some of you followed in the path of the imperfect graduate, Ulysses S. Grant, who had his fair share of demerits, and said the happiest event of his life was "the day I left West Point." When I went to college, I guess you'd have to say I was a Grant man.

You walk in the tradition of Eisenhower,
MacArthur, Patton, and Bradley – the
commanders who saved a civilization – and
of second lieutenants who did the same, by
fighting and dying on distant battlefields.

Graduates of this Academy have brought creativity and courage to every field of endeavor. West Point produced the chief engineer of the Panama Canal ... the mind behind the Manhattan Project ... and the first American to walk in space.

This fine institution gave us the man they say invented baseball, and other young men who over the years perfected the game of football. General George C. Marshall, a VMI graduate, is said to have given this order: "I want an officer for a secret and dangerous mission. I want a West Point football player."

As you leave here today, I know there is one thing you will never miss about this place: Being a plebe. But even a plebe at West Point is made to feel he or she has some standing in the world.

I am told that plebes, when asked whom they outrank, are required to answer: "Sir, the Superintendent's dog, the Commandant's cat ... and all the Admirals in the whole damn Navy." I don't think I'm going to share that with the Secretary of the Navy.

West Point is guided by tradition, and in honor of the "Golden Children of the Corps," I will observe one of the traditions you cherish most. As Commander-in-Chief, I hereby grant amnesty to all cadets who are on restriction for minor conduct offenses. And I leave it to General Lennox to define exactly what minor means.

Every West Point class is commissioned to the Army. Some West Point classes are also commissioned by history, to take part in a great new calling for their country.

Speaking here to the class of 1942 – six months after Pearl Harbor – General Marshall said: “We are determined that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle, our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on one hand, and of overwhelming power on the other.”

Officers graduating that year helped to fulfill that mission, defeating Japan and Germany, and reconstructing those nations as allies.

West Point graduates of the 1940s saw the rise of a deadly new challenge – the challenge of imperial communism – and opposed it from Korea, to Berlin, to Vietnam, in the Cold War from beginning to end. And as the sun set on their struggle, many of these West Point officers lived to see a world transformed.

History has also issued its call to your generation. In your last year, America was attacked by a ruthless and resourceful enemy. You graduate from this Academy in a time of war, taking your place in an American military that is honorable and powerful. Our war on terror is only begun, but in Afghanistan it is well begun. I am proud of the men and women who have fought on my orders.

America is profoundly grateful for all who serve the cause of freedom – and for all who have given their lives in its defense.

This Nation respects and trusts our military, and we are confident of your victories to come.

This war will take many turns we cannot predict. Yet I am certain of this: Wherever we carry it, the American flag will stand not only for power but for freedom. Our Nation's cause has always been larger than our Nation's defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace – a peace that favors human liberty.

We will defend the peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.

Building this just peace is America's opportunity, and America's duty. From this day forward, it is your challenge as well – and we will meet this challenge together.

You will wear the uniform of a great and unique country. America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves: safety from violence ... the rewards of liberty ... and the hope of a better life.

In defending the peace, we face a threat with no precedent. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger the American people and our friends. The attacks of September 11th required a few hundred thousand dollars in the hands of a few dozen evil and deluded men.

All of the chaos and suffering they caused came at much less than the cost of a single tank. The dangers have not passed. This government and the American people are on watch, because we know the terrorists have more money, more men, and more plans.

The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. With the spread of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology, even weak states and small groups could gain a catastrophic power to strike great nations.

Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm our friends, or to strike our people – and we will oppose them with all our power.

For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases those strategies still apply, but new threats also require new thinking.

Deterrence – the promise of massive retaliation against nations – means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.

Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles, or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.

We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.

Homeland defense and missile defense are part of stronger security, and essential priorities for America. Yet the war on terror will not be won on the defensive.

We must take the battle to the enemy,
disrupt his plans, and confront the worst
threats before they emerge. In the new
world we have entered, the only path to
safety is the path of action. And this Nation
will act.

Our security will require the best intelligence, to reveal threats hidden in caves and growing in laboratories. Our security will require modernizing domestic agencies such as the FBI, so they are prepared to act, and act quickly, against danger.

Our security will require transforming the military you will lead – a military that must be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world. And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute – to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and our lives.

The work ahead is difficult. The choices we will face are complex. We must uncover terror cells in sixty or more countries, using every tool of finance, intelligence, and law enforcement. Along with our friends and allies, we must oppose proliferation and confront regimes that sponsor terror, as each case requires.

Some nations need military training to fight terror, and we will provide it. Other nations oppose terror, but tolerate the hatred that leads to terror – and that must change. We will send diplomats where they are needed, and we will send you, our soldiers, where you are needed.

All nations that decide for aggression and terror will pay a price. We will not leave the safety of America and the peace of the planet at the mercy of a few mad terrorists and tyrants. We will lift this dark threat from our country and from the world.

Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then, they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life.

America confronted imperial communism in many different ways – diplomatic, economic, and military. Yet moral clarity was essential to our victory in the Cold War. When leaders like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan refused to gloss over the brutality of tyrants, they gave hope to prisoners, and dissidents, and exiles, and rallied free nations to a great cause.

Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong.

Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong. There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem – and we will lead the world in opposing it.

As we defend the peace, we also have an historic opportunity to preserve the peace. We have our best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war.

The history of the last century in particular was dominated by a series of destructive national rivalries that left battlefields and graveyards across the earth. Germany fought France, and the Axis fought the Allies, and then the East fought the West, in proxy wars and tense standoffs, against a backdrop of nuclear Armageddon.

Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict, in our world, is not. More and more, civilized nations find ourselves on the same side – united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos.

America has – and intends to keep –
military strengths beyond challenge, making
the destabilizing arms races of other eras
pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and
other pursuits of peace.

Today the great powers are also
increasingly united by common values,
instead of divided by conflicting ideologies.

The United States, Japan and our Pacific friends, and now all of Europe, share a deep commitment to human freedom, embodied in strong alliances such as NATO. And the tide of liberty is rising in many other nations. Generations of West Point officers planned and practiced for battles with Soviet Russia.

I have just returned from a new Russia,
now a country reaching toward democracy,
and our partner in the war against terror.

Even in China, leaders are discovering that
economic freedom is the only lasting source
of national wealth. In time, they will find
that social and political freedom is the only
true source of national greatness.

When the great powers share common values, we are better able to confront serious regional conflicts together – better able to cooperate in preventing the spread of violence or economic chaos. In the past, great power rivals took sides in difficult regional problems, making divisions deeper and more complicated.

Today, from the Middle East to South Asia, we are gathering broad international coalitions to increase the pressure for peace. We must build strong, great power relationships when times are good, to help manage crisis when times are bad.

America needs partners to preserve the peace, and we will work with every nation that shares this noble goal.

Finally, America stands for more than the absence of war. We have a great opportunity to extend a just peace, by replacing poverty, repression, and resentment around the world with the hope of a better day.

Through most of history, poverty was persistent, inescapable, and almost universal. In the last few decades, we have seen nations from Chile to South Korea build modern economies and freer societies, lifting millions out of despair and want. There is no mystery to this achievement.

The twentieth century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity – the rule of law ... limits on the power of the state ... respect for women ... private property ... free speech ... equal justice ... and religious tolerance.

America cannot impose this vision – yet we can support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people. In our development aid, in our diplomatic efforts, in our international broadcasting, and in our educational assistance, the United States will promote moderation, tolerance, and human rights. And we will defend the peace that makes all progress possible.

When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply in full to Africa, and Latin America, and the entire Islamic world.

The peoples of Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes. A truly strong nation will permit legal avenues of dissent for all groups that pursue their aspirations without violence.

An advancing nation will pursue economic reform, to unleash the great entrepreneurial energy of its people. A thriving nation will respect the rights of women, because no society can prosper while denying opportunity to half its citizens.

Mothers, fathers, and children across the Islamic world, and all the world, share the same fears and aspirations. In poverty, they struggle. In tyranny, they suffer. And as we saw in Afghanistan, in liberation they celebrate.

America has a greater objective than controlling threats and containing resentment. We will work for a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.

The bicentennial class of West Point
now enters this drama. With all in the
United States Army, you will stand between
your fellow citizens and grave danger.

You will help establish a peace that allows millions around the world to live in liberty and grow in prosperity. You will face times of calm, and times of crisis. And every test will find you prepared – because you are the men and women of West Point. You leave here marked by the character of this academy, carrying with you the highest ideals of our Nation.

Toward the end of his life, Dwight Eisenhower recalled the first day he stood on the plain at West Point. "The feeling came over me," he said, "that the expression 'The United States of America' would now and henceforth mean something different than it had ever before. From here on, it would be the Nation I would be serving, not myself."

Today, your last day at West Point, you begin a life of service, in a career unlike any other. You have answered a calling to hardship and purpose, to risk and honor. At the end of every day you will know that you have faithfully done your duty. May you always bring to that duty the high standards of this great American institution.

May you always be worthy of the long gray
line that stretches two centuries behind you.
On behalf of the Nation, I congratulate each
one of you for the commission you have
earned and the credit you bring to the
United States of America.

Thank you.