GENERAL RICHARD B. MYERS

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Remarks to the United States Military Academy
Graduation, Class of 2005

West Point, New York

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It's an honor to join you today and celebrate this graduation.

To the Class of 2005, congratulations on this remarkable achievement. Even for the goat, don't worry there's hope. After my ROTC summer camp training, a captain wrote in my training report that, "Cadet Myers doesn't have much of a future in the Air Force."

In a few short moments you will take your positions in the Long Grey Line – joining the ranks of West Point graduates who have selflessly and graciously answered a grateful Nation's call to serve, men and women who have done so much to shape our Nation's history.

As you know, one of those graduates – your Dean, Brigadier General Kaufman – will retire this summer after 37 years of service. From the jungles of Vietnam, the National Security Council Staff, Presidential Transition Teams and 22 years at West Point, Dan, you have symbolized the ideals of this Academy and we thank you for your faithful service.

To the parents, I know this is a proud day. Four years ago, when you dropped off your sons and daughters, you were so proud, as you should have been, of these up and coming standouts, full of hope and full of promise. Today, the process is complete and they stand a little taller, with the confidence that only comes after completing a demanding journey. Their success was due in no small part to the values they learned at home and the support you provided during these past four years. So, just the graduates, please join me in a round of applause for your friends and family members who have done so much to make this day possible.

To the staff and faculty who have played the important role of training, educating and supporting the graduates: This day would not be possible without your truly dedicated efforts. I know many of you have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan and shared your experiences in both training and the classroom. We see the results of your efforts seated before us. You have done your job well. The Nation thanks you.

To the international cadets who graduate today: We value your friendship, look forward to serving with you in the future and wish you continued success as you return to serve your nations.

"*Keeping Freedom Alive,*" we actually have a lot in common. After 40 years in uniform I'm about to begin a new adventure in my life. You are about to begin a new career. I should tell you though, during my time at the Pentagon, a new gymnasium has been under construction, but it's open and ready for business. Understand that's not quite the case here.

Actually our common bond runs much deeper. It's the tragic events of 9-11 that unite us. My term as Chairman began a few short weeks after 9-11, and you were a few short weeks into your first academic year. I'm sure you remember that day, still getting used to class and wondering where all those upperclassmen came from all of a sudden. And I'm sure those events shaped every day of your past four years and gave you a clear sense of purpose and a heightened level of resolve.

9-11, in fact, changed the entire world, and we are now in a struggle against violent extremists who want to end our way of life. This war is really about two opposite and incompatible visions for the world: tolerance, democracy, freedom, justice, and hope on the one hand versus intolerance, repression, violence, and fear on the other.

Our Nation is at war. I know this has been brought home to you as on many days you've heard announcements of fallen or injured members of past West Point classes who were bravely doing their duty. They faced an enemy who seeks to destroy our society, an enemy that has no tolerance for individual freedoms or the free expression of ideas. They view the values we represent as a threat. And their weapon of choice is fear. They know absolutely no limits, be they territorial or moral. That's why failure is not an option, and we will not fail.

The military you and I serve in has also changed since 9-11, because we are in a very different war from the wars our Nation has fought in the past. You've studied the campaigns of those past wars, and the lessons of the great battle captains, many of whom were educated in the same classrooms you were. Now you must apply those lessons to a military that is moving from the industrial age to the information age, a military that draws strength from intellectual and technical innovation and most of all is a more joint force. Because when we integrate the strengths of all services, we enhance our capabilities across the spectrum of operations and complicate the choices of our enemies.

In Iraq, you can see that we have truly become one interdependent fighting force. In Ramadi, Iraq, for example, we've had a Marine battalion commander working for an Army brigade commander, who worked for a Marine division commander, under an Army three-star general.

And today our operations go beyond jointness, to include interagency and coalition partners as well. You will find yourselves working more closely than ever before with our partners in the Department of State, the CIA and the FBI, and members of the international community that stand with us.

Of course, as part of this change in our military, the Army you will lead is undergoing a dramatic transformation. The time-honored division, which served on the plains of Europe and in the sands of the Pacific, is giving way, in a sense, to the modular, expeditionary brigade. This new force is more agile, adaptable and versatile, and better suited to meet the threats of the 21st Century.

Because of this struggle against violent extremism, it is clear that nothing is routine. You are pinning on your bars while our Nation is at war, and the only certainty is that your future will be full of challenges and unanticipated obstacles. No one can tell you when they will come or what form they will take, only that they will be different from those of the past. As you are commissioned today, one thing we do know is that much will be asked of you in the coming years.

We also know you are ready. West Point has prepared you well for what lies ahead, be it the demands of combat, or the challenges of leadership. Since you raised your hand on the plain four years ago, you've done more than you ever thought possible. You came together as a class and met rigorous academic standards, demanding physical challenges and tough training at the best military schools.

You have learned how to think, not what to think. You've learned to respond to the uncertainties of a complex and changing world. The foundation is set, but it's only a start. Your education is only interrupted by today's celebration; it must continue. You must be ready for a lifetime of learning.

Because today's security environment demands flexible, creative and adaptive leaders. The Army you will serve has embraced a culture of innovation – not only in the form of new technology, but also by expecting leaders to respond quickly and effectively to constantly changing environments, leaders who are confident as they transition at the turn of a corner from combat operations to discussions with a local tribal leader. Let me give you a couple examples.

LT Mike Baskin, Class of '02, is an acting company commander in the Oruzgan province in Afghanistan. In addition to conducting daily combat patrols, Mike recently help settle a tax dispute between local shopkeepers and a district chief concerning the amount of money being collected and where the funds were actually going. The US military was respected in the region, so Mike decided to escort the tax collector during his rounds and lend some legitimacy to the whole process. He said he had, "my interpreter on my right hand, my fire support officer on my left side and a cup of tea in my hand." He describes his day as a tightrope walk between the governor's rules, Afghan law and the chance of a firefight.

While we're talking about Afghanistan, we've got two real heroes with us today. Lieutenant General Dave Barno, I don't know where Dave is sitting, but Dave led our forces, I think for probably eighteen months. I understand your son is graduating today in the Class of '05. We ought to give Dave a hand. Dave led our efforts over there. It's a long way from home, in a tough environment and there were enormous burdens placed on the US military and Dave did a terrific job. Also with him, somewhere in the stands, is Major General Rick Olsen. Rick was the 25 Infantry Division Commander out of Hawaii. He was the tactical commander in Afghanistan serving under Dave.

Now let me get back to my examples. There was LT Johnson, also Class of '02, assigned to the 101st Airborne in Iraq. He had one week to design two air assault towers – 32 and 43 feet high – for the Iraqi Army Air Assault School. He made the deadline. The division commander asked him where he learned to build towers, and he told him West Point. The commander said, "Well, I guess it will hold up then."

These are just a few examples of the wide range of tasks that will test your ingenuity and there are many, many more.

You're a special class, one of the few since the early days of the Vietnam War who came to West Point in peacetime, saw this Nation transition to war and chose to stay, knowing you would raise your right hand, take an oath and swear to defend the constitution while the Nation was still at war. I know that Cadet Laura Proffit, a member of the woman's handball team, had the chance to join the national team after graduation this year. Laura thanked the coach for this very kind offer, but explained to him she wants to serve in Iraq as an MP platoon leader. As Laura explained, "I have a job to do. I'm here to serve." And there are many more stories like hers. I believe that kind of selfless service is one of the most important traits of a leader. Class of '05 – you have made a very noble decision to serve your country.

Now it is your time to lead, and I know you are ready – the Nation has invested a great deal in you these past four years, as you have invested in yourselves. As you lead, I know you'll take care of America's finest sons and daughters and their families who are in your charge. It is your duty. They are the Nation's new "Greatest Generation."

As I look across this stadium, I also believe there's never been a more important time to serve. I don't believe our Nation has ever faced a greater threat in our history. The preservation of our way of life is at stake. Many take for granted the freedoms that generations of men and women in uniform have fought so hard to secure. We know these freedoms come at great cost, and it takes extraordinary people to keep them alive.

Over these last four years, we have all been forged by the experience of 9-11. I feel tremendous pride in your accomplishments. I thank you and commend you for your decision to serve. As my career approaches its close, I'm very confident in passing the torch to a tremendous new generation of leaders. Because as I look into your eyes, I know our Nation and our future are in great hands, and that each of you will do you part in "Keeping Freedom Alive." Congratulations to you. God bless you and your families and God bless America.