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ADDRESS BY
GENERAL HAROLD K. JOHNSON
CHIEF OF STAFF, UNITED STATES ARMY
AT THE GRADUATION CEREMONY, CLASS OF 1968
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY
WEST POINT, NEW YORK
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 1968

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THINK ON THESE THINGS

This is the day you have been working toward for four busy and strenuous years. It is a day you will never forget, yet one you will never quite clearly remember. Some people say they can recall everything about their graduation except what the speaker had to say. For me it was quite the opposite. Many things that happened on that June day back in 1933 I have forgotten, but I shall never forget General Douglas MacArthur as he stood before us and described the perils of the then current wave of pacifism. These two sentences particularly stuck with me:

Pacific habits do not insure peace nor immunity from national insult or aggression. Any nation that would keep its self-respect must keep alive its martial ardor and be prepared to defend itself.

I pondered a long time about what I, who stand in the dimming twilight of my active service, could say to you who are the most recent marchers to join the Long Gray Line. I would that my thoughts might stay with you as General MacArthur's have stayed with me. Then, the realization came that similar conditions surround our two widely separated graduations. It occurred that, except for the great passage of time, not much has really changed. It is sobering to recall how much has happened and yet how little has changed since that day when I listened to General MacArthur at Trophy Point. Men cried for peace then; men cry for peace now.

We live in a real world, not a dream world. Dreams have no limits; the real world has practical limits, or, at least, limitations. Above all, we must distinguish between the world of our dreams and aspirations and the tough, cruel demanding world of reality where advantage, gain, and privilege are accompanied by work, sweat, tears, and accountability for our actions.

Against that backdrop of reality -- of recognition that the unpleasant does not go away by being ignored and that achievements are the fruits of labor, not wishes -- I would give you this thought to remember: You are about to become a part of an institution on which the very life of the Nation depends. You are about to become a part of a profession whose task it is not only to prepare for war but to be prepared for public unwillingness to face some of the unpleasant facts of the world in which we live. People have always detested war, yet war has been a constant specter among us. Men cry continually for peace, yet there is no peace. Why is this? How can we face these facts sanely as soldiers and as a people?

One of the first cold, hard facts we have to remember is that victory in war is neither a permanent nor an absolute thing. Victory simply indicates that the immediate objectives of that particular struggle have been achieved. Victory carries no guarantee of lasting peace. Woodrow Wilson said that World War I was fought to make the world safe for democracy. It achieved that end -- for a brief period. He said that World War I was a war to end all wars. There he erred. Absolutes cannot be sifted from the ashes of any war. World War II was fought to free the world from the unscrupulous greed and ambitions of the Axis powers. Victory removed that threat -- for a while. But a new threat, secretly kept cooking on a back burner by an ally of expedience, was bubbling over before the ink was dry on the treaties that signalled victory.

If peace is ever attained, even on a relatively permanent basis, it will be achieved in the hearts of men -- not on the battlefield. Fundamentally, every bomb we drop, every shell we fire, every trigger we squeeze is an admission that we have failed as peace-loving people. But as long as we have neighbors in the world community who believe that their selfish aims justify any means, respectable nations must stand ever ready to protect themselves. This is the reality of which I spoke.

It has been well said that evil is aggressive. To me that thought has a corollary. Aggression is evil. At least there appears to be an almost undefinable link between the two -- aggression and evil.

Because of this, I believe that we must guard against aggression in much the same manner that a righteous person struggles against evil -- that is by fully realizing that the suppression of one evil leads to a confrontation with the next in line. Victory over evil can never be absolute until the heart of man has changed. Victory over aggression will never be realized on a permanent basis until the men who rule nations -- and the men who support them -- undergo a sort of spiritual transfiguration that will make them realize once and for all that nothing permanent can be gained by blowing up a neighbor's home and riddling the occupants with bullets.

We Americans fight to maintain, to restore, or to create a climate of stability or an environment of order within which government under law can function effectively. We fight to maintain order where it exists. We restore it where it has been taken away by force. We create order where it has never existed.

I believe this thought is fundamental to our national military philosophy. We seek, first of all, to deter war and then, when deterrence fails, to win any kind of war that may be forced upon us without destroying the institutions of our civilization in the process. In order for deterrence to be credible, we must have a proper mix and balance of military forces that are visible, ready, and capable. Toward these ends we have strategic forces here at home and we have forces deployed in every quarter of the globe. To strengthen our world-wide forces, we have entered into collective security agreements with other members of the Free World, pledging ourselves to join with them in the common defense. The Army plays a major role in all of these efforts and as a result -- and contrary to its almost isolated status when I was first commissioned -- the Army is an active, day-to-day partner of all of the elements of the government as an instrument of national policy. Our officers and men are soldiers, diplomats, and nation-builders -- sometimes filling one of these roles at a time -- often handling them at one and the same time.

There is one notable difference in the Army of today that will have an effect on your careers. The ever-increasing destructiveness of military weapons and the broad areas of military technology and industry which produce military hardware have resulted in a vast civil participation and interest in the development of military equipment and ideas. The sharp demarcation which, early in my career, tended to separate the military from the civilian element of our society has all but disappeared. Progressively, there has developed a cohesive government-industry-military working team on which you must be prepared to spend a great deal of your career.

Your role in this respect becomes doubly important when you remember that the Army is a cross section of our great country. We represent its people because we are its people. We are its servants because the Constitution says that is the way it should be. We are the servants of the people also because the people are the Army's conscience -- and this conscience tells us that it would be wrong to do anything other than serve our people. Because we are of, by, and for the people, we are dedicated to strengthening the security of this Nation ... pledged to preserve its freedom ... pledged to preserve the blessings of liberty for its people of today and tomorrow.

But, as I hinted earlier, your role in relationship with the people you serve will not always be an easy one. I believe some words spoken by General Marshall to the graduating class of 1951 bear repeating in this context. He said:

You will often be misunderstood. You will frequently find the democratic processes of this country difficult to assimilate in a military pattern. But never forget that this is a democracy and you are the servants of the people, and whatever complications that may arise, you have a duty to your country which involves not only the final sacrifice if necessary, but a generous understanding of the role of an officer in the army of a great democracy.

Since coming to West Point you have lived by the code, "Duty-Honor-Country". It has become a part of you. In a few minutes you will raise your right hand and take an oath which, though couched in different terms, carries the same general thought and transforms this code into a legal responsibility. You will swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. You will promise to discharge your duties to the best of your abilities. And you will acknowledge that you assume these obligations freely. I would add the thought that you accept them because you would not want to do less.

The gleaming history of the Long Gray Line is too well known for me to embellish it further. But just to indicate how brightly it still gleams and how strongly it influences those who make it -- as well as those who love those who make it -- I want to read

from a letter I received from a staunch young lady. She came back to these grounds just a few months ago -- not in joy but to accompany her fallen husband to his final resting place. She wrote to me:

In one of his first letters to me, he said he wanted to make me and his country proud of him. . . . Even though his death was a tragic loss to our son . . . and me, I have and I always will feel pride and honor because of his dedication to freedom and his country. . . .

His burial at West Point was the most beautiful, reassuring, and fulfilling moment of my life. When the band played "Onward Christian Soldiers" and the "Alma Mater", strength rose within me. I loved my husband very deeply, but my loss is a contribution to what our nation stands for.

God bless our country!

Not only can you take pride in the courage and the dedication of the countless men who have endowed these halls and fields with immortal honor and glory. You will have further cause for pride. Soon you will be leading American soldiers, and from them you will learn that West Point has no monopoly on courage and loyalty and dedication. The American soldier today, as always, possesses more than his share of these qualities -- enough, in fact, to infect those whom he loves most. As just a single indication of this, let me read the words of yet another brave young lady whose pride in her soldier husband shines through her tears:

. . . in losing his life he has given hope to many. My husband has written that he only regrets that he had but one life to give for his country. He may have used some one else's words but he used his own life.

Yes, you can take pride in the men from West Point who have gone before you. And you can also take great pride in the men you lead. Now, what about yourselves? You have already taken your place in the ranks.

You are facing forward, ready for the command to march. You cannot turn back. You will need every ounce of strength and enthusiasm your youth possesses. You will need all the knowledge and skill you have gained here and all that you can absorb in future training and schooling. You will need friends and family to share your joys and your sorrows and to lend you a hand when you falter. But be sure of this. Times will come when you will need a strength, an assurance, and a faith beyond anything mortal man can lend you. The time will surely come when you will need to remember -- literally and figuratively -- the old soldier's injunction, "If your knees knock, kneel on them."

God is the soldier's refuge. Though each of us may approach Him in his own way, there are a few words with which I would charge you as a bare minimum for spiritual sustenance. They were written by Paul, a Christian, but they apply equally to men of all faiths. I read and leave them with you:

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things
are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever
things are pure, think on these things.

Congratulations ... goodbye ... and good luck!