

## JSC Speech at 2011 West Point Graduation

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As Delivered by Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff , United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, Saturday, May 21, 2011

GENERAL DAVID H. HUNTOON: Class of 2011, please join me in a warm welcome for your graduation speaker, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike G. Mullen. (Applause.)

ADMIRAL MICHAEL MULLEN: Good morning and thank you, General Huntoon, for your kind introduction and for all you and the faculty and the staff here have done to set these young women and men on a course of service to our nation. Your influence reaches well beyond the classroom and far beyond today. Thank you, each of you, for your service.

Secretary McHugh, members of Congress, distinguished visitors, proud families and friends, I thank all of you for being here. I also would like to thank Vice President Biden, who actually gave me a chance to be here today. He graciously bowed out to allow me to speak.

To the members of the 50-year class of 1961 who've been so supportive to these future young officers, I welcome you. And I must say, the more senior I get, the younger the 50-year classes start to look. (Laughter.) In fact, the class of '61 may be the youngest and best-looking of all until next year. (Laughter.)

Most importantly, good morning to the class of 2011. You made it – not just to graduation; I mean to the actual ceremony. (Laughter.) I'm fairly impressed, given the night I bet most of you had – (laughter) – and the lack of sleep you've had this week. But let me be among the first to congratulate you. You've earned this day, and it's a very special honor for me and for my wife, Deborah, to be here with you at the final service academy commencement I will attend on active duty.

I suspect there are a few folks in Annapolis who are probably not very happy with me right now. (Laughter.) But the truth is, in this current job, we have become very close to the Army as we have worked hard to understand our soldiers and the demands placed on them and their families. In fact, over the last four years, one of the greatest privileges of this position has been getting to know the men and women of the United States Army. And days like today remind us why our Army has played such a singular and essential role in our nation's history. In many ways, the story of the United States Army is the story of America, from our founding through the Civil War, a tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup> century and right up until today.

In fact, I was thinking this morning about a figure so prominent in that story, someone with whom I can in many ways relate: George Armstrong Custer. I've got to be honest. His story as a cadet isn't too far from my own as a midshipman. And for the underclassmen in the audience, no, Custer and I did not know each other personally. (Laughter.) I went to school in the '60s, but not the 1860s.

Just as my performance at that other academy was, shall we say, less than ideal, I was then and remain proud that I actually had a class ranking. (Laughter.) Custer's record at West Point left something to be desired as well. A review of conduct records at the time – and they do

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keep track of those things – suggest he had marginal study habits and a proclivity for petty offenses, scoring demerits for being late to formation, hair out of ranks; and my personal favorite, throwing snowballs – (laughter) – for which he logged three demerits. I have to admit, I beat Custer in this department, having racked up 115 demerits in a single day during my last year. (Laughter, cheers, applause.)

What happened actually back then remains highly classified. And that's another nice thing about being chairman: You can actually do that. (Laughter.) But let's just say my offense was a little bit more serious than throwing snowballs. So, yes, I've walked the area a few times. To be honest, there were times when I owned the area. I could have built condos if I'd wanted to. (Laughter.)

Let's face it. Custer and I probably could have used some amnesty back then. So today, on behalf of the commander in chief, I had the chance to grant amnesty to all of you. (Cheers, laughter.) I hope that's not all who need it. While I'm certain this applies to only the tiniest fraction of the cadets here, amnesty is for those on restriction for minor offenses. And I will, of course, defer the definition of "minor" to the commandant. (Laughter.)

Now, Custer graduated last in his class, the goat. That's the same as Navy's mascot. I mean, what's up with that? (Laughter.) Anyway, I finished 611 out of 836. Unfortunately, I didn't have Sedgwick's spurs to spin. I don't know what Custer's excuse was. I just hope our stories end differently. (Laughter.)

If my record in school said anything, it was, Mullen, you are really going to have to work hard in the Navy. And I did. And the opportunities this life of service has provided far exceeded anything I ever expected. I've quite simply had the chance to work with some of the best people in the world, gaining friends and mentors who have supported me and enriched me. None of us get to where we are on our own. There's always someone who helped make it happen. So as proud and happy as you future graduates are, you ought to remember those who got you here: your moms, dads, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and other family members. Thank you for raising these fine women and men in small towns and large cities all over this country, indeed, all over the world. I ought to mention the 10 graduates here from 10 other countries. Thank you for what you do and for your nations – that you do for your nations.

You instilled in your kids a desire to serve, a willingness to sacrifice and to suffer -- and I'm not just talking about mechanical engineering class. Four years ago, you drove them through the stony, lonesome gate on our day, and you handed them over. Doesn't reception sound nice and inviting? (Laughter.) You said: Here, take my child in this time of war, teach them how to lead and how to fight, teach them how to be good public stewards and good leaders to good soldiers.

It was a brave thing you did and difficult. But it was probably more difficult driving away. As the parents of two Naval Academy graduates, my wife Deborah and I know that feeling well: the pride, the fear, the incredible elation of returning home and knowing you won't have to pick up dirty socks off the bathroom floor anymore or scrape pizza cheese off the inside of the microwave or jump in the family car only to find the gas on "E." (Laughter.) So as

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chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but mostly as a dad, I'd like to ask all the family members of the class of 2011 to please stand and be recognized. (Applause.)

Now, today, of course, is really all about you, the class of 2011. And you too deserve a lot of credit. When this country was attacked on 9/11, most of you were just 11 or 12 years old, getting your braces off, getting yelled at for leaving dirty socks on the bathroom floor. We've been at war nearly half your young lives, yet all of you made a choice freely to serve your country, to come here to West Point; well, all of you except maybe Stewart Huntoon, the sup's son, also graduating today. With two brothers serving and a general for a dad, I'm not sure how much flexibility Stewart really had. (Laughter.) It's probably fair to say that conscription is alive and well in the Huntoon house. (Laughter.)

Anyway, your choice, your commitment, speaks well not only of your character, but also of your courage. And for that, I deeply respect and thank each of you. Today, you become a commissioned officer in the ranks of the most respected military on earth, the vast majority of you heading into the Army, the very center of gravity of our force. It's an army tempered by 10 years of combat, an expeditionary force that has literally rewritten just about every rule and every scrap of doctrine it follows to adapt to the reality it now faces.

It's an army, and not a much bigger army than it was on September 11<sup>th</sup> that's now organized around brigade combat teams instead of divisions, that deploys more modular and more flexible capabilities than ever before, that can kill enemies – the enemy swiftly and silently one day and then help build a school or dig a well the next. It's an army that understands the power of ballots as well as bullets and culture as well as conflict, an army that has surged to the fore of our national consciousness, not by being a bulwark, but rather by being an agent of change.

It's an army of flesh and blood, an army of young men and women like yourselves who signed up willingly to face danger and to risk their lives for something greater than those lives. Your job is to lead them and lead them well. That's what they expect of you. Actually it isn't a job at all; it's a duty. And for those of you who have no prior service, let me tell you, you're going to be awestruck at the manner in which these young soldiers do their duty every single day.

A couple of years ago, I visited a unit high atop a hill in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan. You stand up there and you look at the utter desolation of the place and the Spartan conditions these young people are living in and you can't help but get a little thick in the throat. I awarded a Silver Star to a young officer at that outpost, Captain Greg Ambrosia, Class of 2005. He earned that medal for actions the year prior when he was a first lieutenant, just two years after graduating from West Point. Lieutenant Ambrosia's element air assaulted into enemy territory under darkness to establish key observation posts on high ground. By morning, they encountered an enemy force that not only outnumbered them, but surrounded their position, closing into within hand grenade range. Greg fiercely led his soldiers to safety, placing himself in the line of fire. Under his lead, they repelled the opposing force long enough for support to arrive, denying the enemy key terrain. When asked what inspired him to lead like that, he looked down at his boots and said simply: My soldiers.

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I know what he means. I spent more time with the Army in my two years as chairman than I have any other service, and I know what he means. Those troops had been out there 14 months. They'd seen a lot of tough fighting. They'd lost a lot of good soldiers, good buddies. They knew they were going home soon, but they wanted to point out to me all the places nearby where they could venture, because they had learned about the culture and had figured out how to work with the tribal leaders.

When they yelled "hooah" after the ceremony, it wasn't because they were proud of their new medals. It was because they were proud of the difference they knew they were making together as a team. It's that team that has made possible the success we've seen in Iraq, the progress we are now making in Afghanistan, the support we are providing over the skies of Libya and the security we ensure around the globe. You're going to be a member of that team. You're going to be expected to support and to have courage and to lead that team almost from day one, and that's a tall order and hard enough all by itself.

But today I'm going to give you another assignment. I'm going to ask you to take on yet another duty, an obligation far more complex and yet just as important as small-unit leadership. I'm going to ask you to be a statesman as well as a soldier. I'm going to ask you to remember that you are citizens first and foremost. This great republic of ours was founded on some pretty simple ideas – simple but enduring. And one of them is that the people, through their elected representatives, will, as the Constitution stipulates, raise an army and maintain a navy. The people will determine the course the military steers, the skills we perfect, the wars we fight. The people reign supreme. We answer to them. We are therefore – and must remain – a neutral instrument of the state, accountable to our civilian leaders no matter which political party holds sway.

But we can never forget that we too are the people. We too are voters and little league coaches and scout leaders and crossing guards, or at least we should be. We too have an obligation to preserve the very institutions which preserve us as a fighting force. As George Washington so eloquently put it, "When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen."

And so it is not enough today that we deploy, it is not enough today that we fight, it is not enough today that we serve, unless we serve also the greater cause of American self-government and everything that underpins it. Self-government is not some sweet dish upon which a people may indulge themselves. It requires work and effort, sacrifice and strain. It may at times leave a bitter taste, and because it does, self-government burdens us equally with obligation, as well as privilege.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I do not understate the importance of military service, and I am not suggesting that one who serves in uniform has not wholly or without honor rendered the nation her due. Quite the contrary. I have been to the field hospitals. I have been to Dover. And I've seen good men and women laid to rest at Arlington. I know well the full measure of devotion that so many have paid.

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And some of them have come from the long gray line, like First Lieutenant Chris Goeke, Sal Corma and Robert Collins From the Class of 2008, and most recently, First Lieutenant Daren Hidalgo, Class of 2009. Daren was hit by shrapnel in early February but declined surgery to his left leg, opting instead for antibiotics and pain meds so he wouldn't be sidelined from his soldiers. He joked with his dad on the phone about setting off metal detectors. Sixteen days later, Daren was killed by an anti-tank – anti-tank mine, the 81st graduate in these wars to be added to the somber role in Cullum Hall.

Many of you knew and respected Daren, especially the Guppies he commanded, and those who faced him on the racquetball court. He came from a proud military family, his dad an '81 grad; his oldest brother, Class of 2006, currently serving his fourth tour in Afghanistan; and another brother, a Marine who served twice in Iraq. Yes, you all understand quite well the sacrifices demanded by military service.

What I am suggesting is that we in uniform do not have the luxury anymore of assuming that our fellow citizens understand it the same way. Our work is appreciated. Of that, I am certain. There isn't a town or a city I visit where people do not convey to me their great pride in what we do. Even those who do not support the wars support the troops.

But I fear they do not know us. I fear they do not comprehend the full weight of the burden we carry or the price we pay when we return from battle. This is important, because a people uninformed about what they are asking the military to endure is a people inevitably unable to fully grasp the scope of the responsibilities our Constitution levies upon them. Were we more representative of the population, were more American families touched by military service, like that of the Hidalgos or the Huntoon families, perhaps a more advantageous familiarity would ensue. But we are a small force, rightly volunteers, and less than 1 percent of the population, scattered about the country due to base closings, and frequent and lengthy deployments.

We're also fairly insular, speaking our own language of sorts, living within our own unique culture, isolating ourselves either out of fear or from, perhaps, even our own pride. The American people can therefore be forgiven for not possessing an intimate knowledge of our needs or of our deeds. We haven't exactly made it easy for them. And we have been a little busy. But that doesn't excuse us from making the effort. That doesn't excuse us from our own constitutional responsibilities as citizens and soldiers to promote the general welfare, in addition to providing for the common defense. We must help them understand our fellow citizens who so desperately want to help us.

As the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley once said: "Battles are won by the infantry, the armor, the artillery and air teams, by soldiers living in the rains and huddling in the snow. But wars are won by the great strength of a nation, the soldier and the civilian working together."

It's not enough that you graduate from here and learn your skill and lead your troops. You must also help lead your nation, even as second lieutenants. You must win these wars, yes, by working alongside civilians and with other departments of our government, with international

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forces, contractors and nongovernmental agencies. But you also must win them at home by staying in touch with those of your troops who leave the service; by making sure the families of the fallen are cared for and thought of and supported; by communicating often and much with the American people to the degree you can.

Today's operating environment, as you've learned, is a dynamic landscape that grows more interconnected and interdependent every day. Yet we still struggle to make the most basic of connections, the relationships that matter so much. As you go from here, please seek also to go beyond the technical knowledge you've gained and broaden your views. Try to see things through others' eyes and leverage every opportunity to better understand and to be better understood. Know that our trust and confidence go with you. The American people go with you. We are grateful for who you are and all that you will do for the Army and shoulder to shoulder with your fellow citizens for the nation and for the world.

Thank you for your service. May God bless each and every one of you and your families, and may God bless America. (Applause.)

(END)