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The White House
Office of the Vice President

For Immediate Release

May 26, 2017

Remarks by the Vice President at the US Naval Academy Commencement Ceremony

United States Naval Academy
Annapolis, Maryland

10:30 A.M. EDT

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Vice Admiral Carter, Acting Secretary Stackley, Admiral Richardson, General Walsh, all the members of the faculty, the Brigade of Midshipmen, to all the family and friends who traveled near and far to join in this special moment, and congratulations to the newest officers in the United States Navy and Marine Corps -- the Naval Academy Class of 2017! It is an honor to be with you all. (Applause.)

Today, it's my great privilege to bring you congratulations and also to offer you the congratulations of your

Commander-in-Chief, the 45th President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump.
(Applause.)

I must tell you, standing before all of you extraordinary young Americans is deeply humbling for me. It's humbling for me to be here, in the midst of Fleet Week, at this storied military and academic institution, with the extraordinary men and women of the Class of 2017.

Yours is already a class of distinction. You already distinguished yourselves the day you made the decision to put on the uniform of the United States of America and follow the path of service to this great country, and we honor you for it. (Applause.)

The 1,053 men and women before me, you are America's very best. In a few moments, 760 of you will be commissioned as Naval officers in surface warfare, Navy SEALs, aviators, and also in the Silent Service, beneath the waves across the world.

Another 260 of you will leave this place to continue your training as officers in the Marine Corps. And I understand that two of you will leave here as officers in the Air Force. (Applause.) Apparently well represented here. (Laughter.)

No matter what path you take, know that your Commander-in-Chief is proud of you, and so am I, and every American is grateful for you standing tall and stepping forward to serve our nation and protect our people.
(Applause.)

Before I go, though, any further, I'd like to add my voice to those who have remembered three who also stepped forward. They did not leave here into service, they left here into Eternity. But we remember them today as much and honor them as much as all of you, for they stepped forward to serve this country. William McKamey, Justin Zemser, Jason Jablonski were men of honor who stepped forward to serve in the Navy with distinction. And I know the Class of 2017 and America will never forget them, and their families are on our hearts this day. (Applause.)

Today is a day of pride and celebration -- not only for all of you in uniform before me, but for those who saw you through, for your friends, your professors, your commanding officers, and especially your families.

And speaking of which, I'm grateful to be joined today by my commanding officer. Would you mind welcoming the Second Lady of the United States of America who is a Marine Corps mom? Karen Pence is with us today. (Applause.)

As the proud parents of a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps, my wife and I know firsthand that the commissioning of an officer in the United States Armed Forces is a deeply moving moment for your loved ones, the people who believed in you, who believed long ago that you could make it here, who believed even on somedays when you didn't that you would make it to this day. They supported you. They encouraged you. They prayed you through.

So before we go one step further, Class of 2017, why don't you break protocol a little bit? Why don't you stand up, turn around, catch the eye of one of your loved ones in the stands and show them just how thankful you are for all the years of love and support that brought you to this day? (Applause.)

Oh, and before I forget, to all the Midshipmen who here today, the whole cellphone thing and that last deal, your minor conduct offenses are completely forgiven. (Applause.)

Today marks the end of four years of training at the United States Naval Academy, and the commencement of a voyage that will take you into uncharted waters. But make no mistake and have no doubt: You are ready to lead. The training and education you received here has prepared you well to face the challenges that lie ahead, because today you graduate from an incomparable institution.

It's remarkable to think that for more than 170 years, children of liberty have come to the United States Naval Academy to pursue a life of service and sacrifice.

In these halls, on these fields, and by this bay, midshipmen have been molded "morally, mentally, and physically," and "imbued with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty."

They, like you, departed this place and distinguished themselves -- in every era -- as officers in the United States Navy and in the United States Marine Corps.

Today, when the boards and bars are placed on your shoulders, you will become the next link in a chain that stretches back, unbroken, into the mists of American history.

The links before you were forged by heroes -- from John Paul Jones, Stephen Decatur, Bull Halsey, Jim Stockdale, and Michael Murphy.

Because of them, and through the bravery of all who have called themselves Marines and sailors in our nation's history, America's freedom endures to very this day, and we honor all who have gone before you. (Applause.)

But now it's your turn to assume the watch. But remember it's not just America that your predecessors protected. Think today of what the world owes the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

Here at the Navy-Marine Corps Stadium, these stands are emblazoned top to bottom with the names of lands and seas that were consecrated by the sacrifice of the American sailor and Marine.

I see Belleau Wood, where the Marines charged the enemy six times, won the day, to defend the freedom of Western Europe.

I see the Battle of the Atlantic and the many battles of the Pacific -- the Coral Sea, Midway, Leyte Gulf -- when the Navy rolled back the tide of tyranny that had engulfed so much of the Asian Pacific.

I see Inchon in Korea, and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. I see Iraq and Afghanistan, where to this very day

at this very hour, your brothers and sisters in arms stand strong and courageous in defense of liberty in the global war on terror.

And between the places engraved on these stands, I see all that the Navy and Marine Corps have done, and continue to do, day-in and day-out, to foster peace and prosperity on the seven seas, to defend the defenseless in distant lands, to keep the shores of America safe from all who would dare threaten us.

The truth is that today you'll become leaders in the world's greatest force for good -- the Armed Forces of the United States of America. (Applause.)

All of you who do so are patriots, heroes all. You're the pride of your family and you're the pride of the American people. There's not an American across this country who wouldn't like to have the view that I have today. It's very inspiring.

You're from the rest of us, but you're the best of us.

And you'll leave this place and enter a world in desperate need of the "honor, courage, and commitment" that defines the leadership that you learned here.

So a few words of admonition. Trust your training and the principles you learned here, and you'll have success in your career and for your country.

Remember that character is destiny. Be men and women of integrity. People follow people they trust.

I truly believe that among the most important qualities of leadership -- whether it's in the armed forces or any other endeavor -- are humility, orientation to authority, and self-control. And I encourage you to cultivate these qualities as leaders in increasing measure every day from this day forward.

With humility, consider others to be more important than yourselves. Be servant leaders. Approach every challenge as a learner and a listener first. In multiple counselors there is wisdom, and the best decisions by the best leaders come from counsel and collaboration.

Next is orientation to authority. Nothing I have to explain to those of you sitting before me today. Follow the chain of command without exception. Submit yourselves, as the saying goes, to the authorities that have been placed above you. Trust your superiors, trust your orders, and you'll serve and lead well.

And lastly, as arduous as it has been, the physical training in this place, I encourage you to continue, to practice the discipline of self-control.

There's an old proverb that says: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."

And I truly believe that commanding others first begins with being able to command yourself. Discipline is the foundation of leadership.

Integrity, humility, orientation to authority, and self-control are my admonition to you today.

I truly believe that as you pursue these qualities of character, you will lead with distinction. And as you've done to this moment in your life, you'll prove yourselves worthy of the trust that your Commander-in-Chief is placing in you today, to be faithful defenders of our nation and our way of life.

And as you prepare to assume your duties, I want to say to the new officers and to your families, President Donald Trump is the best friend the Armed Forces of the United States will ever have. (Applause.)

And I'll make you a promise, no matter where you're called to serve, no matter what the mission, this Commander-in-Chief will always have your back. (Applause.)

And to the families who are gathered here today and all these rising officers, I say President Donald Trump and I will not rest, we will not relent until we rebuild our military, restore the arsenal of democracy, and ensure that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guard have all the resources that you need to accomplish your mission and come home safe. That is our pledge to each of you. (Applause.)

Earlier this month, President Trump signed a \$21 billion increase in funding for our armed forces, the largest investment in military readiness in nearly a decade. And earlier this week in his very first budget, your Commander-in-Chief laid out one of the largest increases in defense spending since the days of President Ronald Reagan. Let me be clear: The era of budget cuts of the Armed Forces of the United States is over. (Applause.)

The President's budget increases funding for our national defense by \$54 billion, provides more than 56,000 new servicemembers, and begins to rebuild our Navy with eight new battle-force ships headed for the sea. (Applause.)

President Trump is working with the Congress to make the strongest fighting force in history stronger still. And with renewed American strength, your Commander-in-Chief is once again reaffirming America's role as leader of the free world.

While we must always work, and hope, and pray for peace, the best way to ensure peace is for our adversaries and our enemies to know that America is prepared to lead and fight and win any contest, any struggle anywhere on behalf of freedom. (Applause.)

Now you, the Class of 2017, will be the instruments of American policy. Today you leave the Brigade of Midshipmen to join the vanguard of freedom. Your mission is more important now than ever. And the mission of the United States Navy is multi-faceted. You prevent the outbreak of major war and uphold peace and security around the globe. It's part of what the Navy does.

You keep open pathways of prosperity -- from the Straits of Hormuz to the South China Sea, where just yesterday one of our mighty ships conducted freedom of navigation operations, reminding the world what American leadership looks like. That's also what the Navy does.

And you do what the men and women of the Navy have always done, you bear the burdens of your duty with

“honor, courage and commitment,” as the unbreakable backbone of American freedom.

That’s what the Navy does, and that’s now what all of you will do from this day forward. As soon-to-be commissioned officers in the United States Navy and the Marine Corps, all of you, from this day forward, are called to be leaders.

Always remember that you follow in the wake of heroes who have done just that. You can banish any doubt by thinking of those who have gone before, and the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us today. Not just in the stands, but beyond.

When I think of those who have gone before, I think of just a half-century ago, a young man from Trussville, Alabama, did just what you all did. He’d answered the call to put on the uniform and he was sitting right where you're sitting.

He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1967. Not too long after that, he sailed across the Pacific to join the fight for freedom in the jungles of Vietnam.

One day, assigned to a small boat unit, he was working with his team to extract a group of Navy SEALs from behind enemy lines, when his boat was ambushed. He was thrown overboard, wounded by shrapnel. But he still found within himself the strength and courage to swim back to his nearly empty boat and provide cover fire for his brothers.

Despite his own injuries, he personally attended to the wounded. He refused medical assistance until all his brothers-in-arms had been treated. He was awarded the Silver Star for his peerless bravery and leadership under fire.

Fifty years ago, he was sitting right where you're sitting today. He went on from that moment to serve with distinction -- 7th Fleet Commander, Fleet Forces Commander, and when he retired in 2003, he had risen to the rank of a four-star admiral.

And that young man from that small town is with us today. Would you join me in welcoming Admiral Robert Natter, of the Class of 1967, who joins us here today? (Applause.)

We salute you, sir, and all the members of the Class of 1967 who are here.

But to the members of the Naval Academy Class of 2017, I say to all of you: What do you want to be thinking when you’re sitting here 50 years from now?

Because we’ll tell you it will come a lot quicker than you think. I know in my heart you want to be every bit as heroic and defined as leaders as those who have gone before, any one of the members of the Class of 1967 who are here.

So my challenge to all of you today is: Write your own story -- right now, in your mind. See it and go live it.

Write a historic and heroic story of service and selflessness and leadership, and then make it happen.

Many people wonder all their lives if they've made a difference. As the future leaders of the United States Navy and Marine Corps, you'll never have that problem. Your lives will make a world of difference and do a world of good.

So, members of the United States Naval Academy Class of 2017, this is your day. And as you prepare to leave this special place, I urge you to make the principles and precepts you have learned here the anchor of your life.

Carry the example you saw in your peers, your professors, your commanding officers -- "be worthy, never settle." Act, every day, "not for self, but for country."

I challenge you to uphold the highest standards of honor and duty of officers of the United States Navy and the Marine Corps, to be leaders in the mold of those who have gone before, like Admiral Natter and others -- in whose wake you follow.

And above all else, I say to you: Have faith. Leave here today with the confidence that the American people are behind you. From your Commander-in-Chief on down, they support you and are proud of you.

And also if you're of a mind, have faith that He who planted this miracle of democracy on these wilderness shores and has seen her through every trial and has seen you through the challenges of the last four years will never leave you, never forsake you, and that no matter where your path may lead, He will always be there to calm the storm and guide you home.

So thank you for the honor to be with you today. Bravo Zulu to the Class of 2017. May God bless you with fair winds and following seas. God bless the Navy, the Marines, and God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

10:52 A.M. EDT

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