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James Mattis

U.S. Military Academy Cadet Graduation Address

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Thank you.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

What a day. As the chaplain put it, what a "happy day"¹ for our graduates here this morning; for the families that have nurtured them and raised them to take on these challenges; certainly for these -- over to your left flank, here -- the ones who want to be graduating; and for the class of 2018, you're not getting out a month early. By golly, if this class had to go through the full course of -- of difficulty, so will you.

But it's also a great day for the U.S. Army, General Milley, to have this reinforcement, Secretary, coming in to the Army.

And it's a great honor, ladies and gentlemen, for me to be here today at West Point. It's one of the foundational keystones of our nation, and to join you on behalf of our Commander-in-Chief, President Trump, to pay his respects, and the respects of the American people, to the military academy class of 2017.



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I would never have imagined, ladies and gentlemen, when I joined the military at age 18, that I'd be standing here; nor can you graduates anticipate where you'll be many years from now.

By the time this class was in first grade classrooms in every state across our union, our country had been thrust into a war by maniacs who thought that by hurting us they could scare us. Well we don't scare, and nothing better represents America's awesome determination to defend herself than this graduating class.

Every one of you -- Every one of you could have opted out. You'd grown up seeing the war on 'round-the-clock news. There was no draft. Colleges across this land would have moved heaven and earth to recruit you for schools that would never make such demands on you as West Point, starting with Beast Barracks, an aptly named introduction to the Long Gray Line, creating American soldiers who are at their very best when the times are at their very worst.

Today in honoring you graduates, in celebrating your achievements and giving thanks for your commitment, we can see clearly your role in our world. You graduate the same week that saw the murder of 22 innocent young lives. Manchester's tragic loss underscores the purpose for your years of study and training at this elite school. For today, as General Caslen said, you join the ranks of those whose mission is to guard freedom and to protect the innocent from such terror, the innocent noted in your class motto, "so others may dream."²

We must never permit murderers to define our time or warp our sense of the -- of the normal. This is not normal and each of you cadets graduating today are reinforcing the ranks of our Army, bringing fresh vigor, renewing our sense of urgency, and enhancing the Army's lethality needed to prove our enemies wrong. You will drive home a salient point: that free men and women will volunteer to fight, ethically and fiercely, to defend our experiment that you and I call, simply, *America*.

You graduates, commissioned today, will carry the hopes of your country on your young shoulders. You will now join the ranks of an army at war. Volunteers all, we are so very proud of you cadets for taking the place you have earned in the unbroken line of patriots who have come before. Your oath of office connects you to the line of soldiers stretching back to the founding of our country; and in the larger sense, it grows from ancient, even timeless roots, reflecting the tone and commitment of youth long ago who believed freedom is worth defending.



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In terms of serving something larger than yourself, yours is the same oath that was taken by the young men of ancient Athens. They pledged to "fight for the ideals and sacred things of [the] city...to revere and obey the city's laws" and "do [our] best to incite a like [reverence and] respect" in others, and to pass on their city-state far "greater and more beautiful than" they had received it.³ In that sense, it is fitting the cadet cover you wear today, for the last time, features the helmet of the Greek goddess Athena, echoing respect of the civic duty that's found in a democracy, and in a nation, in President Lincoln's words, "of the people, by the people, for the people."

After four years at West Point, you understand what it means to live up to an oath; you understand the commitment that comes with signing a blank check to the American people, payable with your life.

My fine young soldiers, a few miles northwest of Washington, D.C. where I work today, at Antietam Battlefield Cemetery is a statue of a union soldier standing at rest, and overlooking his comrades' graves. It is inscribed with the words, "Not for themselves, but for their country." How simple that thought. So long as our nation breeds patriots like you, defenders who look past the hot political rhetoric of our day and rally to our flag, that Army tradition of serving our country will never die.

To a high and remarkable degree, the American people respect you.

We in the Department of Defense recognize that there are a lot of passions running about in our country, as there ought to be in a vibrant Republic. But for those privileged to wear the cloth of our nation, to serve in the United States Army, you stand the ramparts -- unapologetic, apolitical, defending our experiment in self-governance.

And you **Hold the Line**.

You **Hold the Line** -- (thank you). [Audience applause]

You **Hold the Line**: faithful to duty, confronting our nation's foes with implacable will, knowing that if there's a hill to climb, waiting will not make it any -- any smaller.

You **Hold the Line**: true to honor, living by a moral code regardless of who is watching, knowing that honor is what we give ourselves for a life of meaning.



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You **Hold the Line**: loyal to country and defending the constitution, and defending our fundamental freedoms, knowing from your challenging years here on the Hudson that loyalty only counts where there are a hundred reasons not to be.

Behind me, across Lusk Reservoir, stands a memorial dedicated to the American soldier. On it are inscribed the words: "The lives and destinies of valiant Americans are entrusted to your care and" your "leadership." You have been sharpened through one of the finest educational opportunities in America, given to you by the American people via General Caslen's superb faculty, who expect admirable leadership by example from you as -- as soldier leaders.

My view of a great leader is the player-coach. We need coaches, men and women who know themselves, who take responsibility for themselves, coaching their soldiers to be at the top of their game. Every soldier in your platoon will know your name the day you step in front of them. Your responsibility is to know them. Learn their hopes and dreams. Teach them the difference between a mistake and a lack of discipline. If your troops make mistakes, look in the mirror and figure out how to coach them better. And while we will never tolerate a lack of discipline in the U.S. Army, we must not create a zero-defect environment, because that would suffocate initiative and aggressiveness, the two attributes most vital to battlefield success.

In leading soldiers -- (thank you.) [Audience applause]

In leading soldiers, you will have what F. Scott Fitzgerald called, "riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart."⁴ So recognize that you should never let your passion for excellence to neutralize your compassion for the soldiers you serve, and who will follow you into harm's way. Remember that when the chips are down, it will be the spirits of your often rambunctious soldiers that will provide you the reservoir of courage you will need to draw upon.

Rest assured that nothing you will face will be worse than Shiloh. Nothing can faze the U.S. Army when our soldiers believe in themselves. The chips were down in the freezing cold days before Christmas, 1944, when the Nazi Army was on the attack in the Ardennes. A sergeant in a retreating tank spotted a fellow American digging a foxhole.

The GI, private first class Martin, looked up and said to the sergeant in the tank, "Are you looking for a safe place?"

"Yeah," answered the tanker.



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"Well, buddy," the private said with a drawl, "Just pull your vehicle behind me...I'm the 82nd airborne, and this is as far as the bastards are going."

And that is the army that is being entrusted to your care. On the battlefield, my fine young soldiers, no one wins on their own. Teams win battles, and if you can win the trust and affection of your soldiers, they will win all the battles for you.

If you wish to be a credit to our nation and to your family, you must carry West Point's ethos everywhere you go and practice every day the integrity that builds your character -- for when destiny taps you on the shoulder and thrusts you into a situation that's tough beyond words; when you're sick and you've been three days without sleep; when you've lost some of your beloved troops and the veneer of civilization wears thin, by having lived a disciplined life, you'll be able to reach inside and find the strength that your country is counting on.

Now you are privileged to be embarking on this journey because you're going to learn things about yourself that others will never know.

And we can all, in this stadium today, see the storm clouds gathering. Our enemies are watching. They are calculating and hoping America's military will turn cynical, that we will lose our selfless spirit. They hope our country no longer produces young people willing to shoulder the patriot's burden, to willingly face danger and discomfort. By your commitment you will prove the enemy wrong. Dead wrong.

We Americans are not made of cotton candy.

You're a U.S. soldier -- You are a U.S. soldier and you **Hold the Line.**

The class of 2017 now joins an Army that left bloody footprints at Valley Forge, an Army that defeated the Nazis' last gasp at Bastogne. Your class will certainly be remembered for an Army football team that took to the field of friendly strife and beat Navy.

But you will also be remembered for the history that you're about to write, and when you turn over your troops to their next commander, they will be as good or better than you received them.



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Now, I may not have had the pleasure of knowing each of you personally, but I have very high expectations of you. Your country has very high expectations of you. And we are confident you will not let us down because while we may not know you personally, we do know your character: West Point character.

So fight -- So fight for our ideals and our sacred things; incite in others respect and love for our country and our fellow Americans; and leave this country greater and more beautiful than you inherited it, for that is the duty of every generation.

To the families here today, I can only say: Thank you. Apples don't fall far from the tree. Thank you for the men and women that you raised to become soldiers.

And thank you, too, old shipmate, General Caslen and your team, who coached these members of the Long Gray Line. They will write the Army's story, and in so doing they will carry your spirits into our nation's history.

For duty, for honor, for country: **Hold the Line.**

Congratulations, Class of 2017, and may God bless America.

Thank you.

¹ USMA Chaplain Pawlikowski delivered the Invocation, beginning with the words: "Almighty God, these cadets have been dreaming about this happy day. From now on, they will be counted upon to defend the American Dream -- life, liberty, equal opportunity to pursue happiness in peace...."

² Sentiment and quotation offered by Lieutenant General and 59th Superintendant of West Point Military Academy Robert Caslen in his graduation day remarks delivered immediately prior to those of Secretary Mattis above.

³ Quoted in the Oath of the Athenian City-State and derived from the Ephebic Oath

⁴ Quoted from Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: "When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction--Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn."