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**John F. Kennedy**

*Address to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Air Force Academy*

delivered 5 June 1963, Colorado Spring, Colorado



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

General, Secretary Zuckert, General LeMay, Members of the Congress, Mr. Fraser, fellow graduates:

I want to express this -- my appreciation for this -- becoming an instant graduate of this academy, and consider it a high honor.

I -- Mr. Salinger, the Press Secretary of the White House, received the following letter several days ago:

*The White House*

*[1600] Pennsylvania Avenue,*

*Washington, D.C.*



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*Dear Sir:*

*Would you desire to become an honorary member of the Air Force Cadet Wing? For granting one small favor your name [Mr. Salinger] shall become more hallowed and revered than the combined memories of Generals Mitchell, Arnold and Doolittle.*

*My humble desire is that you convey a request from the Cadet Wing to the President. Sir, there are countless numbers of our group who are oppressed by Class III punishments, the bane of cadets everywhere. The President is our only hope for salvation. By granting amnesty to our oppressed brethren he and you could end our anguish and depression.*

*Please, sir, help us return to the ranks of the living so that we may work for the New Frontier with enthusiasm and vigor.*

*[Amnesty for the Exiles!]<sup>1</sup>*

It's signed "Sincerely, Cadet Marvin B. Hopkins," who's obviously going to be a future General.

In accordance with -- As Mr. Salinger wants to be honored with Generals Mitchell, Arnold, and Doolittle, I therefore take great pleasure in granting amnesty to all those who not only deserve it, but need it.

It is customary for speakers on these occasions to say in graduating addresses that commencement signifies the beginning instead of an end, yet this thought applies with particular force to those of you who are graduating from our Nation's service academies today, for today you receive not only your degrees, but also your commission, and tomorrow you join with all those in the military service, in the foreign service, the civil service, and elsewhere, and one million of them serve outside our frontiers who have chosen to serve the Great Republic at a turning point in our history.



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You will have an opportunity to help make that history -- an opportunity for a service career more varied and demanding than any that has been opened to any officer corps in the history of any country.

There are some who might be skeptical of that assertion. They claim that the future of the Air Force is mortgaged to an obsolete weapons system, the manned aircraft; or that Air Force officers of the future will be nothing more than "silent silo sitters." But nothing could be further from the truth. It is this very on -- onrush of technology which demands an expanding role for the Nation's Air Force and Air Force officers, and which guarantees that an Air Force career in the next 40 years will be even more changing and more challenging than the careers of the last 40 years.

For some of you will travel where no man has ever traveled before. Some of you will fly the fastest planes that have ever been built, reach the highest altitudes that man has ever gone to, and lift the heaviest payloads of any aviator in history. Some of you will hold in your hands the most awesome destructive power which any nation or any man has conceived. Some of you will work with the leaders of new nations which were not even nations a few years ago. Some of you will support guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations that combine the newest techniques of warfare with the oldest techniques of the jungle. And some of you will help develop new planes that spread their wings in flight, detect other planes at an unheard of distance, deliver new weapons with unprecedented accuracy, and survey the ground from incredible heights as a testament to our strong faith in the future of air power and the manned airplane.

I am announcing today that the United States will commit itself to an important new program in civilian aviation. Civilian aviation, long both the beneficiary and the benefactor of military aviation, is of necessity equally dynamic. Neither the economics nor the politics of international air competition permits us to stand still in this area. Today the challenging new frontier in commercial aviation and in military aviation is a frontier already crossed by the military: supersonic flight.



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Leading members of the Administration under the chairmanship of the Vice President have been considering carefully the role to be played by the National Government in determining the economic and technical feasibility of an American commercial supersonic aircraft, and in the development of such an aircraft if it be feasible.

Having reviewed their recommendations, it is my judgment that this Government should immediately commence a new program in partnership with private industry to develop at the earliest practical date the prototype of a commercially successful supersonic transport superior to that being built in any other country of the world. An open, preliminary design competition will be initiated immediately among American airframe and powerplant manufacturers with a more detailed design phase to follow. If these initial phases do not produce an aircraft capable of transporting people and goods safely, swiftly, and at prices the traveler can afford and the airlines find profitable, we shall not go further.

But if we can build the best operational plane of this type -- and I believe we can -- then the Congress and the country should be prepared to invest the funds and effort necessary to maintain this Nation's lead in long-range aircraft, a lead we have held since the end of the Second World War, a lead we should make every responsible effort to maintain. Spurred by competition from across the Atlantic and by the productivity of our own companies, the Federal Government must pledge funds to supplement the risk capital to be contributed by private companies. It must then rely heavily on the flexibility and ingenuity of private enterprise to make the detailed decisions and to introduce successfully this new jet-age transport into worldwide service, and we are talking about a plane in the end of the 60's that will move ahead at a speed faster than Mach 2 to all corners of the globe. This commitment, I believe, is essential to a strong and forward-looking Nation, and indicates the future of the manned aircraft as we move into a missile age as well.

The fact that the greatest value of all of the weapons of massive retaliation lies in their ability to deter war does not diminish their importance, nor will national security in the years ahead be achieved simply by piling up bigger bombs or burying our missiles under bigger loads of



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concrete. For in an imperfect world where human folly has been the rule and not the exception, the surest way to bring on the war that can never happen is to sit back and assure ourselves it will not happen. The existence of mutual nuclear deterrents cannot be shrugged off as stalemate, for our national security in a period of rapid change will depend on constant reappraisal of our present doctrines, on alertness to new developments, on imagination and resourcefulness and new ideas. Stalemate is a static term and no one of you would be here today if you believed you were entering an outmoded service requiring only custodial duties in a period of nuclear stalemate.

I am impressed by the extraordinary scholastic record, unmatched by any new college or university in this country, which has been made by the students and graduates of this Academy. Four Rhodes scholarships last year, two this year, and other selected scholarships, and also your record in the Graduate Record Examination makes the people of this country proud of this Academy and the Air Force which made it possible.

This country is proud of the fact that more than one out of five of your all-military faculty has a Doctor's degree, and all the rest have Master's degrees. This is what we need for leadership in our military services, for the Air Force officer of today and tomorrow requires the broadest kind of scholarship to understand a most complex and changing world. He requires understanding and learning unmatched in the days before World War II. Any graduate of this Academy who serves in our Armed Forces will need to know economics and history, and international affairs, and languages. You will need an appreciation of other societies, and an understanding of our own Nation's purposes and policy.

General Norstad's leadership in NATO, General Smart's outstanding tour of duty as the senior military representative in Japan are examples of Air Force officers who use their broad talents for the benefit of our country. Many of you will have similar opportunity to represent this country in negotiations with our adversaries as well as our friends, working with international organizations, working in every way in the hundred free countries around the globe to help them maintain their freedom.



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Your major responsibilities, in the final analysis, will relate to military command. Some of you may be members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and participate as advisers to that President who holds office.

Last October's crisis in the Caribbean amply demonstrated that military policy and power cannot and must not be separated from political and diplomatic decisions. Whatever the military motives and implications of the reckless attempt to put missiles on the island of Cuba, the political and psychological implications were equally important. We needed in October -- and we had them; and we shall need them in the future, and we shall have them -- military commanders who are conscious of the enormous stakes in the nuclear age of every decision that they take, who are aware of the fact that there are no purely political decisions or purely military decisions; that every problem is a mixture of both, men who know the difference between vital interests and peripheral interests, who can maneuver military forces with judgment and precision, as well as courage and determination, and who can foresee the effects of military action on political policy. We need men, in short, who can cope with the challenges of a new political struggle, an armed doctrine which uses every weapon in the struggle around the globe.

We live in a world, in short, where the principal problems that we face are not susceptible to military solutions alone. The role of our military power in essence is therefore to free ourselves and our allies to pursue the goals of freedom without the danger of enemy attack. But we do not have a separate military policy, and a separate diplomatic policy, and a separate disarmament policy, and a separate foreign aid policy, all unrelated to each other. They are all bound up together in the policy of the United States. Our goal is a coherent, overall, national security policy, one that truly serves the best interests of this country and those who depend upon it. It is worth noting that all of the decisions which we now face today will come in increased numbers in the months and years ahead.



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I want to congratulate all of you who have chosen the United States Air Force as a career. As far as any of us can now see in Washington, in the days ahead you will occupy positions of the highest responsibility, and merely because we move into a changing period of weapon technology, as well as political challenge, because, in fact, we move into that period, there is greater need for you than ever before.

You, here today on this field, your colleagues at Omaha, Nebraska, or at Eglin in Florida, or who may be stationed in Western Europe, or men who are at sea in ships a hundreds of miles from land, or soldiers in camps in Texas, or on the Island of Okinawa, they maintain the freedom by being on the ready. They maintain the freedom, the security, and the peace not only of the United States, but of the dozens of countries who are allied to us who are close to the Communist power and who depend upon us and, in a sense, only upon us for their freedom and security.

These distant ships, these distant planes, these distant men keep the peace in a great half-circle stretching all the way from Berlin to South Korea. This is the role which history and our own determination has placed upon a country which lived most of its history in isolation and neutrality, and yet in the last 18 years have carried the burden for free people everywhere. I think that this is a burden which we accept willingly, recognizing that if this country does not accept it, no people will, recognizing that in the most difficult time in the whole life of freedom, the United States is called upon to play its greatest role.

This is a role which we are proud to accept, and I'm particularly proud to see the United States accept it in the presence of these young men who have committed themselves to the service [of] our country and to the cause of its freedom. I congratulate you all, and most of all, I congratulate your mothers and fathers who made it possible.

Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> Repeated words excluded from this portion of the transcript