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commencement remarks

I am honored to have the opportunity to play a role in the launching of this noble ship, the Class of 1984.

I do not come here today, I must confess, with any great confidence in the immortality of remarks uttered on these occasions. The commencement address hardly rates as one of the more notable American art forms. Actually one of the charms of the ceremony is that no one can remember in later years what a commencement speaker has said, or, indeed, even who the speaker was. Ask your parents what eminent figure dispensed wisdom to them at this turning point in their own lives, and I will be much surprised if they can conjure the vaguest recollection out of the caverns of memory. "Commencements," one college president confided to me the other day, "must be viewed as ritual -- which anthropologists define as a special form of communication without information."

The fact that no one remembers what they say confers on commencement speakers a certain license, so I might as well take full advantage of the opportunity you are giving me and speak my mind. Still, I will do my best to detain you no longer than necessary, representing, as I do, the last obstacle between you and your diplomas.

In accepting this invitation, I invoke the cautionary words of Abraham Lincoln when he addressed the Wisconsin Agricultural Society in 1859. "I presume," Lincoln said, "I am not expected to employ the time assigned me in the mere flattery of farmers, as a class. My opinion of them is that, in proportion to numbers, they are neither better nor worse than other people." In the same spirit,

I will not employ my time in mere flattery of college students as a class. If anyone cares, my opinion of students is that, in proportion to numbers, they are neither better nor worse than other people -- except perhaps their professors; and I do not propose to explain which way that comparison goes.

It does occur to me that exactly forty-six years -- nearly half a century -- ago, I was one of you, sitting and waiting patiently as you now patiently sit and wait. It occurs to me also that I looked on the alumni returning for their 50th reunion as a venerable collection of doddering old fossils. They were in fact members of the class of 1884, who had finished college a bare two decades after the end of the Civil War. In their college years, the telephone and the typewriter were exciting novelties. The automobile and the airplane were unknown. The microchip was undreamed of. My wisdom is probably as relevant to your future as I supposed theirs was to mine.

My own class -- the Class of 1938 -- graduated forty-six years ago into a country racked by depression, where ten million people sought work and could not find it. The gross national product amounted to 85 billion in the dollars of the time. Franklin Roosevelt was under attack as a profligate spender because two years earlier he had run a budget deficit of \$3.5 billion. I must add that there were compensations: Harvard's tuition in 1938 was \$400.

The year after I graduated, the Second World War burst out in Europe. Three and a half years later the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. On the sixth anniversary of my commencement, I was overseas in the European Theater of Operations. I devoutly hope that the Class of 1984 will have, at home and abroad, a considerably more tranquil future. At any rate, I invite you to reflect on such matters when you have been out of college the same length of time I have -- which, if my arithmetic is correct, will be in the year 2030.

If, that is, there will be anyone around in the year 2030. My generation debouched into a world torn by depression and war. Those were sufficiently grim times. I was one of the lucky ones, but some of my classmates never returned from overseas. Your prospects are at once much better than ours -- and, if things go wrong, infinitely worse. Science and technology hold out for you a dazzling and almost unimaginable future. At the same time, science and technology hold out an alternative future -- unimaginable too, but endlessly, illimitably black. "Man has mounted science, and is now run away with," the historian Henry Adams wrote over a century ago. "... Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world."

The day that Henry Adams darkly foresaw has now arrived. I had long supposed that, with the nuclear genie out of the bottle, the prospect of the suicide of the human race would have a sobering effect on those who possess the power to initiate nuclear war. For most of the nuclear age this supposition has been true. Statesmen have generally understood, as President Kennedy said in 1961, "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind." I saw how after the Cuban missile crisis a shaken Kennedy -- and a shaken Khrushchev too -- moved swiftly toward a partial ban on nuclear testing and a systematic reduction of international acrimony.

I no longer, as I look around, have much confidence in the admonitory effect of the possession of nuclear weapons. We live today in the age of an unlimited nuclear arms race. The long effort to bring that arms race under control -- an effort that had been continuing for a generation under a succession of American and Soviet leaders -- has come to a halt. In no forum today are the superpowers talking to each other in an attempt to save the race from suicide. Each superpower piles up nuclear weapons for itself far in excess of the numbers

required to obliterate the other. With nearly 50,000 nuclear warheads in the hands of the superpowers and heaven knows how many more scattered or hidden or incipient in other hands, it is all too easy to foresee nuclear war precipitated by terrorists, or by madness, or by accident, or by misreading signs on a radar screen.

The prospect ahead is nothing less than the extinction of the human race -- a prospect that, one would think, would call on our best resources of wisdom, prudence and statesmanship. It should summon above all the capacity for vision and idealism that has marked the American leaders who most profoundly seized the imagination and mobilized the hope of the suffering world in this bitter century -- Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. These men were realists, prepared to fight and fight well, when fighting was necessary. But they were always concerned to look beyond war to the means of a stable and enduring peace.

Instead we see in our own land today the systematic militarization of foreign policy -- a development that can only have ominous consequences for the world and for ourselves. Of course military power is essential in the defense of our nation. No one knows that better than those of us who served in the Army overseas during the Second World War. The United States in this dangerous world must have a defense second to none. But arms are only one element in the conduct of foreign affairs. Under the present administration, the military element has burst out of rational control and today dominates all other aspects of policy.

The Department of Defense is requesting \$305 billion in appropriations for the fiscal year 1985 and demands a total of \$1.8 trillion over the next five years, 1985-89. On top of the \$900 billion already appropriated since Mr. Reagan's inauguration, the Reagan administration, if it is returned to

office in 1984, will spend nearly \$3 trillion for defense by 1989. \$3 trillion -- a sum like that defies comprehension.

Of course the Pentagon claims that every cent is vital to the security of the nation -- one dime less, they tell us, and we are in deep trouble. The military always claims this. Military budgets, power, prestige depend on such claims. But claiming does not make it so. "No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life," said Lord Salisbury, the British statesman, "as that you never should trust experts. If you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe."

There is no greater racket in the world today than the tacit collusion between the Pentagon and the Soviet Defense Ministry, each side asserting that the other is stronger in order to get bigger budgets for themselves. This tacit conspiracy, based on a common vested interest in crisis, is a major problem for statesmen seeking peace. As President Kennedy said to Norman Cousins, then editor of the Saturday Review, in the spring of 1963, "Mr. Khrushchev and I occupy approximately the same political positions inside our governments. He would like to prevent a nuclear war but is under severe pressure from his hard-line crowd, which interprets every move in that direction as appeasement. I've got similar problems.... The hard-liners in the Soviet Union and the United States feed on one another." They are feeding even more voraciously on each other twenty-one years later.

And today we Americans do not have civilian leadership inclined to question and contain military demands. Instead, every bleat from the Pentagon is regarded with reverence in the White House. "Why is it," asked Senator Dale Bumpers of Arkansas the other day, "we exalt Government when it builds bombs and missiles, and condemn it when it spends money to vaccinate children, provide health care

to the poor and elderly, fund crippled children's clinics and aid students who are bright and yearn for a college education but who come from families that can't possibly afford it?" Yet we know that no part of government is more spend-thrift, wasteful, prodigal and carefree in throwing the taxpayers' money about than the armed services.

This year is the centenary of the birth of Harry Truman. I can imagine no better way than to commemorate that great man than for Congress to establish a Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program on the model of the committee Harry Truman so ably and responsibly chaired during the Second World War. With a new Truman Committee, perhaps we would have the Pentagon buying fewer \$1.08 machine screws for \$36.77, fewer 17 cent lampbulbs for \$44, fewer \$7.99 electrical plugs for \$726.86. We would have fewer cases, as after that glorious American triumph over Grenada, where the Army awarded 8612 medals though it never had more than 7000 troops on the island. Do you realize that the Army has many more generals today than it had in 1945 when it was six times larger? And do you still take the defense budget seriously?

This blank check for the Pentagon is the inevitable result of a foreign policy that sees military action as an instrument not of last but of first resort. Whatever the problem, this administration reaches instinctively for the gun. Arms sales replace diplomacy in our relations with the Third World, and in the Reagan years the United States has reached the proud position of top arms salesman to developing nations, supplying nearly 40 percent of arms delivered as against 17 percent from the Soviet Union. If Lebanon is torn by historic feuds and antagonisms, send in the Marines and fix it all up. If Grenada has an obnoxious government, send in the Army and overthrow it. If we don't like what is going on in Nicaragua, tell the CIA to mine its harbors and to organize guerrillas. If there are age-old social conflicts in El Salvador,

cure them by guns.' We have sent \$100 million in military aid to El Salvador in the last year, and the administration is asking for another \$300 million over the next eighteen months. Then, if the El Salvador regime fails to defeat the insurgents, with U.S. prestige irretrievably committed through the massive Reagan military aid program, the inevitable next step will be to send in U.S. troops -- that is, if Mr. Reagan is reelected. For he will certainly interpret reelection as a mandate for unilateral U.S. military intervention in Central America.

It is ironic that this most bellicose of modern American Presidents should be the one and only President of the Second World War generation who saw no service overseas during that war. Or perhaps it is not so odd, for Presidents who have experienced war at first hand are less insouciant about sending new generations of young men out to kill and to die.

Mr. Reagan tries to make himself the personification of patriotism. He talks a lot about "standing tall" and rushing to the defense of the republic. If asked to compare the President with, say, George McGovern, many Americans would choose Mr. Reagan as the quintessential American patriot. Yet, when the republic was in its greatest danger in my lifetime, Mr. Reagan fought the Second World War on the film lots of Hollywood, sleeping in his own bed every night, while Mr. McGovern was a bomber pilot, flew 35 missions, twice brought in planes severely damaged by antiaircraft fire and won the Distinguished Flying Cross. That sounds to me like real patriotism.

There are occasions when military action is essential, as World War II veterans well know. But in the nuclear age force should be employed only when national security is vitally threatened and when all other means fail. Diplomacy has become a lost art these days in Washington. In the meantime, the promiscuous resort to force, the relentless militarization of purpose and remedy, only heighten the danger of world war.

The militarization of policy has made us look trigger-happy to the rest of the world. It frightens our friends quite as much as it frightens our foes; and, as realists, we must understand that, despite all our power, we cannot achieve any major objective in foreign affairs on our own. Mrs. Thatcher and President Mitterand have been our most faithful friends in Europe. Even they object to the invasion of Grenada, the militarization of Central America, the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. So do leading Latin American democracies, like Mexico, Venezeula and Argentina.

In ignoring the reaction of other nations, we are ignoring the wisdom of the Founding Fathers. "An attention to the judgment of other nations," the 63rd Federalist Paper reminds us, "is important to every government for two reasons: the one is, that, independently of the merits of any particular plan or measure, it is desirable, on various accounts, that it should appear to other nations as the offspring of a wise and honorable policy; the second is, that in doubtful cases, particularly where the national councils may be warped by some strong passion or momentary interest, the presumed or known opinion of the impartial world may be the best guide that can be followed. What has not America lost by her want of character with foreign nations; and how many errors and follies would she not have avoided, if the justice and propriety of her measures had, in every instance, been previously tried by the light in which they would probably appear to the unbiased part of mankind?"

Equally ominous are the problems this militarization of policy creates for the American Constitution. The Founding Fathers for good reason placed the power to authorize war in the hands exclusively of Congress. But the idea today appears to be that Congress must back the President in whatever he thinks should be done. This is exceedingly dangerous doctrine. Congress has its independent role in the American polity and, despite what men in high office tell us, is

under no moral or constitutional obligation to support a President in every act of crime or folly. The last thing we need is a revival of the imperial Presidency.

The present American course of military unilateralism threatens our alliances, our Constitution and the peace of the world. Our foreign policy today is perilously out of balance. The militarization of purpose and remedy, far from contributing to world peace, intensifies the likelihood of world war. The time is overdue for the restoration of balance in our conduct of foreign affairs -- for the revival of the art of diplomacy, for consultation with our allies, for the end of bluster, brag and bullying as our mode of dealing with the rest of the world.

Military action has its vital place. But it must be the last, not the first, recourse. No one in this century understood the role of force better than Winston Churchill. "Those who are prone by temperament and character," Churchill wrote in words that apply more than ever in the nuclear age, "to seek sharp and clear-cut solutions of difficult and obscure problems, who are ready to fight whenever some challenge comes from a foreign Power, have not always been right. On the other hand, those whose inclination is ... to seek patiently and faithfully for peaceful compromise are not always wrong. On the contrary, in the majority of instances they may be right, not only morally but from a practical standpoint."

If we have leaders who will act on this principle and return to the generous spirit of the great statesmen of this republic, you members of the Class of 1984 will have a far better chance to be alive and well in the year 2034 -- and ready for your own joyous 50th reunion.