

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Commencement Address at the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut

May 18, 2011

The President. Well, good afternoon, everyone. Distinguished guests, Governor Malloy, and Congressman Courtney, families, friends, and most of all—well, let's try it this way: Cadets, what class is this?

Cadets. Class of 2011!

The President. Okay, I just wanted to make sure.

It is a great honor to be with you as we commission the newest ensigns in the United States Coast Guard. And, cadets, let me say—and I know your families will agree—you all look fantastic. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, Secretary Napolitano, for your introduction, but more importantly, your outstanding leadership in keeping our homeland secure and, along with Admiral Papp, keeping our Coast Guard strong.

And to Admiral Burhoe and Academy faculty and staff, thank you for building these outstanding young men and women into "inspiring leaders of character" who are "prepared to serve their country." And, Admiral Burhoe, as you prepare to retire in the coming days, I just want to thank you and your wife Betsy for 34 years of distinguished service to our country. We are grateful.

I have to say, by the way, he looks a little too young to retire. So—[*laughter*]—you don't want him roaming around the house. Make sure he's doing something. [*Laughter*]

Although my understanding is she's not here today, I also want to acknowledge your next superintendent, Admiral Sandra Stosz. She will become the first woman ever to lead one of our Nation's military academies. That's an incredible tribute to her, but also a tribute to the opportunities that the Coast Guard affords women of talent and commitment, including the class of 2011, which has one of the largest numbers of women cadets in the history of this Academy.

But, cadets, today is your day. But it's also a testament to those who supported you every step of your journey. When you chose this life of service, your families backed you up. When you thought you couldn't go on, they bucked you up. I suspect, when things got a little tight in the money department, they coughed it up. [*Laughter*] So, cadets, you are here because of them, and I ask you in joining me in honoring your remarkable families.

I have to say, it is a personal pleasure to be here, because since the day I took office, the United States Coast Guard has played a special role in my Presidency and with my family. I've seen the Coast Guard's precision when some of you—the class of 2011—marched in the parade during my Inauguration. You looked pretty good on that day too. [*Laughter*] It was a little colder that day, if you recall. [*Laughter*]

I've seen your devotion to duty all along the Gulf Coast, when the Coast Guard, including members of this class, worked day and night, tirelessly, as you led the largest environmental cleanup in our Nation's history.

I've seen your pride, when I was in, of all places, Afghanistan. I was in Bagram, thanking our troops for their service. And I was giving a shout-out to every service: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. And then, way in the back of the crowd, a voice shouted out, "And Coast Guard!" [Laughter] There was no ocean in sight. [Laughter] Not a body of water visible anywhere. [Laughter] But the Coast Guard was there, serving with honor, as you have in every major conflict that our Nation has ever fought.

In fact, I see the professionalism of the Coast Guard every day in the officers and enlisted personnel who serve with us at the White House. And they include Admiral Stephen Rochon, who wore the uniform for 36 years, then became the Chief Usher at the White House, responsible for keeping us running smooth, day in, day out. His grandson Patrick is graduating today, and I'm told that Patrick's classmates have a bet on whether his grandfather can still fit in his old uniform. [Laughter]

Well, Admiral Rochon is here. I want to thank him for his outstanding service to our family and our Nation. And by the way, the uniform still fits, so we're proud of him.

I'd add that my Michelle is inspired by the Coast Guard as well. Last summer, Michelle had the honor of becoming the first First Lady to sponsor a Coast Guard cutter, the *Stratton*. And she was deeply moved by the story of Dorothy Stratton and the SPARS that she led in World War II. At the christening, Michelle was also very relieved that the bottle actually broke. [Laughter] And I know that she is so grateful to be part of the life of that Coast Guard cutter and its crew.

Cadets, this is the heritage, this is the tradition that you will carry forward. And I know that you will do so with the same sense of purpose, the same sense of patriotism that have defined your days at this Academy.

You excelled physically, especially that first Swab Summer. Your upperclassmen—your cadre—were kind enough to let you carry all those heavy bags and logs—[laughter]—and rafts over your head until your arms were numb. They treated you to the pleasure of relentless questioning and memorization and recitations. And as a reward for your endurance, they gave you the gift of Sea Trials. [Laughter] But you survived.

You excelled intellectually. Among your ranks is Cadet Melissa McCafferty. She is a recipient of the Truman Scholarship, making the Coast Guard Academy one of the only schools ever to win that prestigious scholarship 3 years in a row—3 years in a row.

Where's Melissa? Let me embarrass you in front of everybody. [Laughter] There you are, right over there. Congratulations.

I'm also told that the class of 2011 has earned the highest GPA of any class in the history of this Academy. So these are not just pretty faces here. [Laughter] Well done.

You've excelled professionally, pulling together and succeeding together during your training, serving in dozens of countries on six continents, aboard cutters saving lives on the high seas, joining maritime exercises with our foreign partners, keeping illegal drugs from reaching our streets.

Through it all, you've embraced "the liking for the sea and its lore." That includes a liking and respect for one another. You come from every station in life, every corner of our country, including my home State of Hawaii. In fact, I'm told that Cadet Jennifer Proctor comes from my old high school, Punahou in Honolulu. Where is she? Jennifer? Come on. Howzit? Right on.

This Academy welcomes cadets from all over the world, including two dedicated young men in your class from the Marshall Islands and Romania. And I want to thank President Zedkaia of the Marshall Islands, as well as King George Tupou from Tonga who is here. They are two of America's closest partners among the Pacific Island nations. Their citizens serve bravely alongside our forces, including in Afghanistan. And we are very, very grateful. So thank you so much for your presence.

And, cadets, you have excelled ethically. "Who lives here reveres honor, honors duty." You know those words well. They set the highest standards of conduct and integrity for all who pass through Chase Hall. Your presence here today, and the new boards that your loved ones and mentors will place upon your shoulders, signify that you have met these highest of standards.

Now, despite your impressive achievements, I'm told that over these 4 years you've also earned a reputation as a class that always had to wait. [*Laughter*] That includes waiting longer than any other first-year class in Academy history for the privileges that you had earned. I've kept you waiting as well. [*Laughter*] So in keeping with long-standing tradition—[*laughter*]—I hereby absolve all cadets serving restrictions for minor offenses. The superintendent reminded me, that's "minor" offenses. [*Laughter*]

So, cadets, today is a celebration of your success. But it's also a day of expectation, because soon you will report to flight school, sectors, and shore commands or begin your sea duty aboard cutters.

Your Nation has great expectations as well. We've made an enormous investment to build you into the leaders that you are. Yes, the Coast Guard may be the smallest of our services, and you will be tasked with vast responsibilities, protecting thousands of miles of coast, securing hundreds of ports, patrolling millions of miles of ocean. But I'm absolutely confident that you will meet these obligations. For in you we see the same spirit that has made your service "Always Ready" for more than two centuries.

In you we see the same courage of the Coast Guardsmen who defended our young Nation when we didn't have a Navy, who preserved our Union, who fought back at Pearl Harbor, who landed our boats on the beaches of Normandy, and who patrolled the rivers of Vietnam.

In you we see the readiness that has made the Coast Guard one of our Nation's first-responders, leading the evacuation of lower Manhattan on 9/11 and often being the very first Americans on the scene, from the earthquake in Haiti to the oil spill in the Gulf.

In you we see the same compassion that has led coast guardsmen to pull stranded Americans from the rooftops during Katrina, save desperate migrants clinging to rafts in the Caribbean, and even today, as the Coast Guard rescues Americans from the surging Mississippi.

And while we can never predict what the future may hold, we know that the complex missions asked of our Coast Guard have never been more important. Around the world, we need you to partner with other nations to secure their ports, protect the vital shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf, combat piracy off the Horn of Africa, and help train foreign partners from the Americas to Africa to Asia. Here at home, we need you to stop those smugglers and protect our oceans and prevent terrorists from slipping deadly weapons into our ports.

Indeed, every American can be proud of our brave military and intelligence personnel who made sure that the terrorist leader who attacked us on 9/11 will never threaten America again. But the hard work of protecting our country, the hard work goes on securing our

homeland and guarding our shores, we will never waver in the defense of this country that we love.

None of these missions will be easy, and none are without risk. Etched among the headstones of Arlington and in seaside memorials overlooking the oceans are the names of Coast Guard men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our Nation. This is the life and the risk that you have chosen to accept.

As your Commander in Chief, I want you to know that your Nation will do everything in our power to help you succeed. That's why we're investing in the new ships and national security cutters and aircraft that you need to get the job done. It's why we're adding new inspectors and investigators and support personnel to keep pace with today's missions.

And because my wife Michelle has met with so many Coast Guard spouses and children and heard about the challenges that they face as military families, we've made it a priority to improve Coast Guard housing and childcare. We need to take care of your families as well as they take care of you.

Ultimately though, it won't be the advanced technologies, the additional budget that determines your success. It won't be the cutters that you command that give you the edge when the seas are swelling and a life is on the line. Your lives in service will be defined by something else, something inside of you, invisible to the eye but obvious for all to see. The arc of your careers, like the course of our country, will be shaped by the values that have kept us strong for more than 200 years.

You see, as Americans, we've always fixed our eyes on the future, setting our sights on what lies beyond the horizon. We haven't always known exactly how to get there. We haven't always known every shoal that lies ahead. But we are sure of our destination, and so we've charted our course toward that "more perfect union."

We haven't always been the biggest or strongest of nations. There have been moments in our history when others have counted us out or predicted the demise of our improbable American experiment. But what the naysayers and doubters have never understood is that our American journey has always been propelled by a spirit and strength that sets us apart.

Like any good crew, we welcome the talents and skills of all people, no matter where you come from, no matter what you look like. With every generation, we renew our country with the drive and dynamism that says, here in America, anything is possible.

And when tough times inevitably come, when war and economic hardship threaten to blow us off course, we do what Americans have always done. We remember our moral compass, that we are citizens with obligations to each other, that we all have responsibilities, that we're all in this together, that we rise and fall as one, that we are the United States of America. And so we pull together. We each do our part, knowing that we have navigated rough seas before and we will do so again.

We Americans are an optimistic people. We know that even the darkest storms pass. We know that a brighter day beckons, that, yes, tomorrow can be a better day. For through two centuries of challenge and change, we have never lost sight of our guiding stars: the liberty, the justice, the opportunity that we seek for ourselves and the universal freedoms and rights that we stand for around the world.

So, cadets, if we remember this, if you stay true to the lessons you've learned here on the Thames, if we hold fast to what keeps us strong and unique among nations, then I am confident

that future historians will look back on this moment and say that when we faced the test of our time. We stood our watch. We did our duty. We continued our American journey. And we passed our country, safer and stronger, to the next generation.

So congratulations, class of 2011. *Semper Paratus*. And God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Adm. Robert J. Papp, Jr., USCG, commandant, U.S. Coast Guard; Adm. J. Scott Burhoe, USCG, current superintendent, and his wife Betsy; Adm. Sandra Stosz, USCG, incoming superintendent, U.S. Coast Guard Academy; and Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization, who was killed in a U.S. Navy SEALs counterterrorism operation in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 1, 2011.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Coast Guard Academy, commencement address in New London, CT.

Locations: New London, CT.

Names: bin Laden, Usama; Burhoe, Betsy; Burhoe, J. Scott; Courtney, Joseph D.; King Saiosi Tupou V; Malloy, Dannel P.; McCafferty, Melissa; Napolitano, Janet A.; Obama, Michelle; Papp, Robert J., Jr.; Proctor, Jennifer; Rochon, Patrick; Rochon, Stephen W.; Stosz, Sandra; Zedkaia, Jurelang.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Connecticut : Governor; Connecticut : President's visit; Deaths : bin Laden, Usama; Gulf of Mexico : Deepwater Horizon oil spill :: Environmental effects and cleanup efforts ; Homeland Security, Department of : Coast Guard, U.S.; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Marshall Islands : Afghanistan, Marshallese military forces, deployment; Marshall Islands : President; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Tonga : Afghanistan, Tongan military forces, deployment; Tonga : King.

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