

President George H. W. Bush  
Falcon Stadium, US Air Force Academy  
Colorado Springs, Colo.  
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## Remarks at the United States Air Force Academy Commencement Ceremony

What a day. Please be seated, and thank you for that warm welcome. To my old friend, Senator Goldwater; to Secretary Rice and General McPeak; to General Hamm, who's done such a fantastic job here; ladies and gentlemen; graduates. Our altitude is 7,250 feet above sea level -- far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis. And I'm sorry I'm a little late. I flunked my room inspection at Kennebunkport this morning. [Laughter] Barbara gave me 20 demerits. Then it took time to talk the pilot of Air Force One, Colonel Barr, out of doing an Immelmann over this stadium. [Laughter]

It is an honor for me to join you here at "Wild Blue U," the home of the quick and the brave. There's never been a better day to be part of this magnificent team.

For 40 years, my generation struggled in the confines of a divided world, frozen in the ice of ideological conflict, preoccupied with the possibility of yet another war in Europe. More recently, many here and abroad wondered whether America still possessed the strength and the will to bear the burden of world leadership. My fellow Americans, we do, and we will.

Through strength of example and commitment, we lead. You've been taught the price and the importance of leadership. As you leave the Academy, you answer your nation's call to advance the cause of freedom, to lead. There's a new sense of pride and patriotism in our land. And it's good for our nation's soul.

The beltway cynics may call this renewal of patriotism old-fashioned, but Americans rarely mistake cynicism for sophistication. Patriotism binds the real and lasting fabric of our nation. Assertive but not arrogant -- self-assured, kind, generous -- we remain committed to our fundamental values.

So today I speak to you, and to every member of America's Armed Forces, to say thanks. When others weren't sure we were up to the task, you were. When your country asked you to serve, you did. And when others said, "No, no, we're not ready; we can't," you said, "Yes, we are ready; we can." You and your colleagues in all the services prove that Americans consider no risk too great, no burden too onerous to defend our interests and our principles -- in short, to do what's just and to do what's right.

Consider our fundamental decency and humanity, our commitment to liberty. Our service men and women in the Gulf, weary from months in the desert, now help suffering Kurds and the people of Bangladesh. When a carrier on the way home after months in the Gulf was diverted to Bangladesh, a crewman was asked, "Aren't you disappointed that you don't get to go home?" He replied, "Not at all. We're saving lives. We're doing what we ought to do."

We do not dictate the courses nations follow, but neither can we overlook the fact that our examples reshape the world. We can't right all wrongs, but neither can any nation lead as we can.

Joined by the world's leading nations, we worked to create a coalition in which countries great and small joined forces to liberate Kuwait. That coalition saw soldiers from dozens of lands fight shoulder to shoulder, fly wingtip to wingtip in the cause of freedom. And it saw our forces as fully integrated as any in our history, demonstrating the true strength of joint operations.

A year before you came to Colorado Springs, I was privileged to be here. And I told the class of '86, "There's no doubt the Soviets remain our major adversary. Our two separate systems represent fundamentally different values."

Since then, we've seen remarkable political change. But let's not forget the Soviet Union retains enormous military strength. It will have the largest land force in Europe for the foreseeable future. With perhaps five new strategic missile systems in development, they'll be ready for yet another round of strategic modernization by the mid-1990's.

At the same time, however, Soviet troops have embarked on the long trek home from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland -- and, happily, from a reunified Germany. We are hopeful that the Soviet Union itself will continue its move toward freedom.

As superpower polarization and conflict melt, military thinkers must focus on more volatile regimes, regimes packed with modern weapons and seething with ancient ambitions. We are committed to stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But there is danger that despite our efforts, by the end of this century nearly two dozen developing nations could have ballistic missiles. Many already have nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons programs.

Nowhere are the dangers of weapons of proliferation more urgent than in the Middle East. After consulting with governments inside the region and elsewhere about how to slow and then reverse the buildup of unnecessary and destabilizing weapons, I am today proposing a Middle East arms control initiative.

It features supplier guidelines on conventional arms exports; barriers to exports that contribute to weapons of mass destruction; a freeze now, and later a ban on surface-to-surface missiles in the region; and a ban on production of nuclear weapons material. Halting the proliferation of conventional and unconventional weapons in the Middle East while supporting the legitimate need of every state to defend itself will require the cooperation of many states in the region and around the world. It won't be easy, but the path to peace never is.

And as the world changes, our military must evolve and change with it. Last year, I announced a shift in our defense focus away from old threats and toward the dangers that will face us in the years to come. We need a more agile, flexible military force that we can put where it is needed, when it is needed. I also called for new technology in our defense systems. And I proposed a defense package to the Congress that meets these demands.

In the years ahead, defense spending will drop to below 4 percent of our gross national product, the lowest level in over 50 years. But we must spend that money in ways that address the threats that we are likely to face in the future. Although we developed this budget before the Gulf war, it anticipates very important lessons of that war -- lessons that, frankly, some in the United States Congress now ignore.

Gulf lesson 1 is the value of air power. I remember meeting with General McPeak up at Camp David. In his quiet but forceful way, he told me exactly what he felt air power could do. After he left, I turned to my trusted National Security Adviser -- who's with me here today, a former political science professor here at the Academy and a pilot, General Scowcroft -- and said, ``Brent, does this guy really know what he's talking about?" General Scowcroft assured me he did. And General McPeak, like the entire Air Force, was right on target from day one. The Gulf war taught us that we must retain combat superiority in the skies.

Then there's Gulf lesson 2: The value of Stealth. Surprise is a classic principle of warfare, and yes, it depends on sound intelligence work. But Stealth adds a new dimension of surprise. Our air strikes were the most effective, yet humane, in the history of warfare.

The F - 117 proved itself by doing more, doing it better, doing it for less, and targeting soldiers, not civilians. It flew hundreds of sorties into the most heavily defended areas without a scratch.

The F - 117 carried a revolution in warfare on its wings. The next step in that revolution is the Stealth bomber, the B - 2. Not only for its contribution to nuclear deterrence, but also from the standpoint of conventional cost-effectiveness, the B - 2 has no peer. It carries over 10 times the conventional load of an F - 117 and can fly 5 times further between refuelings. It gets to the job faster, with more tons of ordnance -- without the force buildup and time we needed prior to Desert Storm -- and without needing foreign airfields in the immediate proximity of a conflict. And it replaces B - 52 aircraft approaching twice the age of you graduates -- and I say that respectfully. [Laughter]

Yet, last week, the House of Representatives voted to terminate the B - 2, redirecting those funds at unnecessary weapons. Anyone who tells you the B - 2 is ``too expensive" hasn't seen flak up close lately. America needs the B - 2 bomber, and I'm going to fight for it every inch of the way.

Gulf lesson 3: We learned that missile defense works and that it promotes peace and security. In the Gulf, we had the technologies of defense to pick up where theories of deterrence left off. You see, Saddam Hussein was not deterred, but the Patriot saved lives and helped keep the coalition together.

That's one reason that we've refocused strategic defense toward Global Protection Against Limited Strikes or GPALS, as we call it. It defends us and our allies from accidental launches or from the missile attacks of international renegades. While the Patriot worked well in the Gulf, we must prepare for the missiles more likely to be used by future aggressors. We can't build a defense system that simply responds to the threats of the past.

Yet some in Congress want to gut our ability to develop strategic defenses. Last week the House irresponsibly voted to cut nearly billion from GPALS and to kill its most promising technologies. I call on the Senate today to restore our missile defense programs, to safeguard American and allied lives, and to promote security.

Gulf lesson 4, the most fundamental, is the value of people. People fight and win wars. And this nation never has fielded better fighting men and women than it does today. In 1980, 68 percent of those enlisting in the military had high school diplomas. Now it's 95 percent and climbing. The military has become our greatest equal opportunity employer. It offers everyone a chance, and it promotes people solely on the basis of merit. The men and women you will soon be leading are the best educated and most motivated anywhere, anytime, ever. You know the standards. You know, I was tempted to ask General Scowcroft how he thought I was performing

during the war, but I was afraid he'd say, ``Fast, neat, average, friendly, good, good."  
[Laughter]

Although we will cut troop levels 25 percent by mid-decade, we must ensure that they remain fully prepared to respond quickly and decisively to crises. We must ensure that they are totally integrated, taking full advantage of the kinds of joint operations so powerfully demonstrated in the Gulf. We must ensure that they have weapons that emerge from military necessity, not pork barrel politics. We must ensure that the cuts in the Active and Reserve components result in the most effective and efficient forces possible. We must not compromise our readiness just to protect unneeded bases, programs, and forces.

Look, no President -- no President could or would deny Congress its right to approve budgets or conduct oversight. But as Commander in Chief, my greatest responsibility is national defense, and I will veto any bill that doesn't support and sustain my defense program.

And so, I ask the Congress to help make our forces leaner and more effective. Don't weigh them down with pork. Don't deny our people the tools that they will need to do their jobs in the next century.

You graduates will find that no other combat force you encounter will have your skills, your technology, or support. You'll find that in world leadership we have no challengers. But in our turbulent world, you will find no lack of challenges. And I know you are ready.

So, to all of America's servicemen -- all of them, wherever they may be -- and all of America's servicewomen, I salute them. I salute you. And to this 1991 graduating class of the United States Air Force Academy, may I say, you have earned your commissions. Well done, and Godspeed. And may God bless you and the United States of America. Thank you all very, very much.

*Note: President Bush spoke at 11:15 a.m. in Falcon Stadium. In his opening remarks, he referred to former Senator Barry Goldwater; Secretary of the Air Force Donald B. Rice; Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, Air Force Chief of Staff; Gen. Charles Hamm, superintendent of the U.S. Air Force Academy. Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Following his remarks, President Bush returned to Washington, DC.*