

Air Force ROTC Signing Ceremony at Harvard University
Speech by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James
22 April 2016

SECRETARY JAMES: Thank you very, very much, one and all, but most especially thank you, President Faust, Dean Khurana. Thank you for that beautiful and stirring rendition of our National Anthem. And to the Color Guard, you all were looking sharp. I've never seen it done better. Thank you, as well. And thank you to all of those who worked so hard to bring this day together, not only this important ceremony, but the reception that we will enjoy shortly thereafter.

It is such a pleasure and the honor is all mine to be able to be here with my husband, Frank, and my team, to be able to participate in what I think is this very important event for both the Air Force and Harvard University. And also, a special thanks to the hospitality that you have already shown us during this visit and for your official commitment to continue to extend that hospitality to our Air Force cadets here and in the future.

As you pointed out, President Faust, Harvard is truly, truly steeped -- it's an institution steeped in military history. And just by way of background, I was treated just moments ago to a magnificent walking tour with the president and with some others. Military veterans were leading the tour, so give a shout out to [Emerald] and [Holden]. Fantastic job. Thank you. [Applause] And we were going point by point across the campus and I was learning more and more about the long crimson line of Harvard's military tradition.

You heard the president tell some of those stories. You all could probably give that tour, many of you, just as Holden and as Emerald did. But if you haven't been on it, I really recommend it. Steeped, steeped in tradition.

But as a result, we've talked about that some already. I won't attempt to repeat those stories now, but instead, I want to spend my few minutes and really talk to you about the future.

Now, as you can imagine, my home base is Washington, D.C., and I work at the Pentagon. And there in the Pentagon we spend a lot of time talking about how America must maintain its strategic military advantage in the face of potential adversaries who, at this moment, are investing and they are testing and they are catching up to some of our capabilities in a very rapid way. And let me tell you, the discussions that we have in the Pentagon about technologies and training and concepts of operation, all of which, by the way, are designed to keep us one, two steps ahead of those possible competitors, these discussions can get pretty heated.

Now, the officers who will be entering the Air Force each year from Detachment 365, no question about it, these are among the best that our nation has to offer. And soon -- soon -- all of you will be joining these very discussions, as well as executing on some of the very, very important missions that we are running around the world as we speak. And by the way, everything we do in the United States military these days is joint. We do this in the Air Force with our partners in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and almost always with allies in a coalition sense.

Now, just a few examples. In just a few weeks, Cadet [Zander Farrow], where are you, Zander? Let me see you. All right. I've got my eyes on you, man, all right? In just a few weeks, Zander is going to be, of course, Second Lieutenant Farrow. And Zander volunteered for and was selected to train as a remotely piloted aircraft pilot. Now, this is a very exciting and demanding job and it's a growth area in our United States Air Force. And most people know, but just in the event there's a few that don't, most of America calls these platforms "drones," but

not us. We call them “remotely piloted aircraft.” So in less than two years, Zander, you’re going to be making decisions that are going to save lives of American forces on the ground and you’ll be helping to eliminate terrorists before they can carry out their evil plans.

And here’s another example. In just over a little bit more than a year, Cadet [Keira Hedrick], where are you, Keira? There she is, all right. Another Harvard student, of course, will graduate and you will attend manned pilot training. As I understand it, you ultimately hope to be an astronaut. And as I look at you, I’m going to put my money on you because I think you’re going to accomplish that goal.

You’ve got a lot going for you. First of all, you’re graduating from a world-class institution. Secondly, you’ve got some great role models to follow in their footsteps, and the one that comes to mind is Harvard graduate and astronaut Stephanie Wilson. Number three, as I understand it you spent two summers as an intern with NASA designing aircraft wings. And fourth, of course your vow to become an officer and enter into the world’s premier air, space, and cyberspace force.

And you, by the way, are going to be entering an Air Force that doesn’t have the same barriers that it had perhaps in years past because, you see, Keira and others will now be serving in an Air Force where women can serve in any position for which they are qualified. And by the way, the same story goes for the Navy and the Army and the Marine Corps. That is a recent development by order of the Secretary of Defense, so all positions are now open to women in our military, all positions for which they are qualified.

She’s also going to be serving in an Air Force that welcomes all who can serve, regardless of gender, race, religion, or who you choose to love. Leveraging the best talent that America has to offer is the secret weapon of the United States. It’s even more important than

that training and that technology and those concepts of operations that I told you about earlier. So I'm certainly very proud to be here to recognize Harvard University's continuing commitment to that future.

And finally, President Faust, if I may, just a few more words. I want to recognize you personally and specifically because, you see, it is because of your leadership that we're renewing and we're reinforcing the essential linkage between our citizens and our military. And it is because of your leadership that our Air Force can now reach Harvard students and Harvard students can now reach the United States Air Force. And because of your leadership institutions beyond Harvard across our country now hold their doors open wide for America's military. So I thank you for that personally. This is a partnership that we, of course, need to continue if we are to remain the preeminent military force in the world.

So we in the United States Air Force are certainly very proud to help Harvard students make that transition very soon from Harvard crimson to Air Force blue. So to all of my airmen and prospective airmen that I see in the audience I say aim high, airmen. Aim high.

Thank you very much. [Applause]

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