

**Remarks by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James
at the U.S. Air Force Academy Graduation
2 June 2016**

SECRETARY JAMES: Thank you so much, General Johnson, and Mr. President, General Welsh, Governor Hickenlooper, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the faculty, the community leaders who are with us today, and most importantly, to the mighty, mighty class of 2016. I can't hear you. That's more like it. Isn't that cool, Mr. President, when they do that? I love that part. [Laughter]

As your other speakers have said, I, too, could not imagine a more beautiful day to be sitting at the base of the Rockies celebrating four years of hard work and rigorous training and looking forward to what our graduates will add to our service in the years ahead.

We're so honored today to be joined by our Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, and in just a few short moments, I am going to yield the podium to him.

First, I just have a few things to say, and I'm going to direct myself now to the class of 2016. Let's rewind, if you will, with me, four years ago when you were sitting on the front third of your chair and hoping not to get asked Scofield's quote. [Laughter]

Now, one of the main reasons you were able to make it through basic cadet training was team work. I think you would agree with me, team work is essential. When it comes to team work, our President is second to none. During his time in office, the President has unified our allies and partners across the globe and he's done so here at home as well.

From negotiating a landmark climate change accord to the transpacific partnership trade deal to passage of the Affordable Care Act, to putting millions of people in this country back to work and championing same sex marriage, the President has led with strength and conviction.

As you graduate, I charge all of you to follow the President's lead, because the Air Force that you will lead is much more diverse and inclusive than when you started four years ago, and therefore, you, too, must build and celebrate diverse and inclusive teams.

You must foster an environment of integrity and dignity and respect for all, and to allow your teams to flourish in a culture free from sexual assault and harassment of any kind.

Now, moving to three years ago, you were engrossed in summer activities. You were soaring. You were trying to survive, and at least trying to do a little bit of sleeping. I'm not sure you got much of that in, but I know you were trying.

That same summer, President Obama and Mrs. Obama led the way for improvements in veteran services, from streamlining professional credentialing to the post-9/11 G.I. Bill, to Joining Forces, which is an important program to encourage American companies to hire our veterans and our military family members, and modernizing our Veterans Affairs system.

The President and First Lady believe that all who serve should receive top notch benefits and world class care. As you graduate, I charge all of you to follow the President's lead. You must take care of your fellow Airmen, both past and present, and never ever leave behind a fallen Airman.

Two years ago, you were taking part in Operation Air Force, you were working beasts, and you were making that awful trek from the lower two dig parking lot. At this same time, President Obama launched his strategy to degrade, and it will ultimately destroy ISIL.

Under the President's leadership, the U.S. and our coalition partners have regained control of key areas in Iraq and Syria, and be proud, be proud of your Air Force because the Air Force of the United States has led the way in this coalition fight, and ISIL now controls about 30

percent less territory than it did two years ago.

As you graduate, I charge you to follow the President's lead, to become experts in your mission, because the President, this one and future Presidents, will call upon you and our nation and our allies to defend our liberties and safeguard the world.

One year ago as you entered your senior year and started counting down the days to graduation, President Obama was guiding America to an historic agreement with Iran and five other world powers. This agreement, of course, blocks Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon which ultimately is going to create a more stable world.

As you graduate today, I charge you to follow the President's lead, have the courage to make the tough calls in the face of criticism and never ever give up, and I can promise you that critics are abound, but true leaders are few, which brings me full circle and back to today.

Today, you're surrounded by your classmates, your brothers and sisters in arms. You are also surrounded by your parents, your family, your loved ones, who have supported you throughout your entire time here, and who will continue to support your continued service as officers in the greatest Air Force in the world.

As Commander in Chief, our President has made taking care of our military and families a top priority. So has our Secretary of Defense, so has General Welsh made it a top priority. For me, it's been my number one priority since the day I began the job.

Please join me now in celebrating and giving a round of applause to the people who are in the stands today, your family, friends, and loved ones who are most responsible for bringing you to where you are today. [Applause]

When you graduate, rest assured you will have the necessary equipment and

training to execute the types of missions that we will ask of you, whether it is fighting global terrorism or leading a nuclear missile crew, or delivering humanitarian aid when disaster strikes somewhere around the globe, we're going to take care of you and your families so that you in turn can take care of all of us.

Believe me, you have big challenges on the horizon, not only combatting violent extremist organizations like ISIL, but you will also face the situation in the South China Sea, a resurgent Russia, ongoing dangers from Iran, from North Korea, but here we are, class of 2016.

Soon, you are going to be confronting these challenges head on, and you will be entrusted to carry out the nation's will with our most precious research, and that is not equipment, that is America's sons and daughters.

I have no doubt that you are ready, and as you graduate, you must lead. So, aim high, Airmen. Aim high.

Now, it is my distinct honor and privilege to welcome our Commander in Chief, the President of the United States, President Barack Obama. [Applause]

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