

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the National Defense University

March 12, 2009

Thank you, General Wilson, for the wonderful introduction and your hospitality. Thank you to Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen for the extraordinary service that they render to this country. I want to acknowledge the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who are doing outstanding work and have been a great support to me, and Ambassador Ross.

To each of you who are here: for your service to our country and your commitment to our security, I want to say thank you on behalf of the American people. You know, I think so highly of NDU that I picked one of your alumni, General Jim Jones, to be my National Security Adviser.

And I know many of you have served in harm's way, and for that you have the respect of a grateful nation. And before I go any further, I want to acknowledge all of our troops now serving overseas. They have shouldered an awesome responsibility. They have performed brilliantly. And they have the full support of the American people.

Today it is my privilege to join you in dedicating this building to the memory of President Abraham Lincoln. We know, of course, that there are many monuments to Lincoln's memory across this country. His words are written into stately walls and his image is printed on our currency. His story is taught in our schools and his name is synonymous with freedom. You and I live in the Union that he saved, and we inherited the progress that he made possible.

Yet despite this far-reaching legacy, it is still—to quote the man himself—"altogether fitting and proper" that we should set aside this ground, and dedicate this hall, in his memory, because Lincoln's Presidency was characterized by war, even as his ambition was a just and lasting peace. Here, in this indispensable institution, we find a living legacy to that ambition. Here, at National Defense University, men and women come together to think, to learn, and to seek new strategies to defend our Union while pursuing the goal of a just and lasting peace.

The grounds that make up this campus tell us an interesting story about how America can pursue this goal. Fort McNair was built over two centuries ago to protect a young Capital against invasion. Its defenses were traditional: training for soldiers, stockpiles of arms, fortifications to hold advancing armies at bay. It was overrun by a British attack in the War of 1812, and treated the wounded warriors of the Civil War in Lincoln's day.

And then, just over a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt came here to lay the cornerstone of the Army War College. In dedicating the school, Roosevelt spoke words that resonate to this day. He said, "More and more, it has become evident in modern warfare that the efficiency of the unit, of the individual officer, and the individual enlisted man is going to be the prime factor in deciding the fate of fought fields."

More than 100 years later, Roosevelt's insight remain the essential mission of this institution: the belief that even as our weapons have grown more powerful, individuals still determine the strength of our national security; the belief that individual Americans remain, as Roosevelt said, "the prime factor in deciding the fate of fought fields."

The battlefields that we now face would be unfamiliar to Lincoln and Roosevelt. The days when President Lincoln would wander down to the War Department's telegraph office to get reports from the front are long past, but the threats to our Nation are real, and they are direct.

From this fort, which was founded to defend the city of Washington against invasion, you could stand on September 11, 2001, and watch the smoke from the Pentagon billowing up across the Potomac. The attacks of 9/11 signaled the new dangers of the 21st century. And today, our people are still threatened by violent extremists, and we're still at war with terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan who are plotting to do us harm.

Yet terrorism and extremism make up just one part of the many challenges that confront our Nation. In Iraq, we will surely face difficult days ahead as we responsibly end a war by transitioning to Iraqi control of their country. A historic economic downturn has put at stake the prosperity that underpins our strength, while putting at risk the stability of governments and the survival of people around the world. We're threatened by the spread of the world's deadliest weapons, by emerging cyber threats, and by a dependence on foreign oil that endangers our security and our planet. Poverty, disease, the persistence of conflict and genocide in the 21st century challenge our international alliances, partnerships, and institutions, and must call on all of us to reexamine our assumptions.

These are the battlefields of the 21st century; these are the threats that we now face. And in these struggles, the United States of America must succeed, and we will succeed. We also know that the old approaches won't meet the challenges of our time. Threats now move freely across borders, and the ability to do great harm lies in the hands of individuals as well as nations. No technology, no matter how smart, can stop the spread of nuclear weapons. No army, no matter how strong, can eliminate every adversary. No weapon, no matter how powerful, can erase the hatred that lies in someone's heart.

So it falls to institutions like this and to individuals like you to help us understand the world as it is, to develop the capacities that we need to confront emerging danger, and to act with purpose and pragmatism to turn this moment of peril into one of promise. That's how we will find new pathways to peace and security. That is the work that we must do.

Now, make no mistake: This Nation will maintain our military dominance. We will have the strongest Armed Forces in the history of the world. And we will do whatever it takes to sustain our technological advantage, and to invest in the capabilities that we need to protect our interests, and to defeat and deter any conventional enemy. But we also need to look beyond this conventional advantage as we develop the new approaches and new capabilities of the 21st century, and in that effort, this university must play a critical role.

Our troops are faced with complex missions. Increasingly, they're called upon to defeat nimble enemies while keeping local populations on their side. And that's why my administration is committed to growing the size of our ground forces, and to investing in the skills that can help our troops succeed in the unconventional mission that they now face. We must understand different languages and different cultures; we must study determined adversaries and developing tactics. That's the education that takes place within the walls of this university, and that is the work that must be done to keep our Nation safe.

America must also balance and integrate all elements of our national power. We cannot continue to push the burden on to our military alone, nor leave dormant any aspect of the full arsenal of American capability. And that's why my administration is committed to renewing diplomacy as a tool of American power, and to developing our civilian national security capabilities. This effort takes place within the walls of this university, where civilians sit alongside soldiers in the classroom. And it must continue out in the field, where American civilians can advance opportunity, enhance governance and the rule of law, and attack the

causes of war around the world. We have to enlist our civilians in the same way they—we enlist those members of the armed services in understanding this broad mission that we have.

And finally, we know that the United States cannot defeat global threats alone. There is no permanent American solution to the security challenges that we face within any foreign nation, nor can the world meet the tests of our time without strong American leadership. And that's why my administration is committed to comprehensive engagement with the world, including strengthened partnerships with the foreign militaries and security forces that can combat our common enemies. Those partnerships are advanced here, within the walls of this university, where we welcome men and women from around the world to study alongside Americans, to understand our values, to forge partnerships, and hopefully friendships, that contribute to a safer world.

The lesson of history is that peace and security do not come easily. Each person who passes through this university will play a different role. Some of you will serve in uniform abroad, or help train troops here at home. Some will be diplomats, intelligence officers, or congressional staffers; others will work in the private sector. Some will rise to be senior officers and top strategists, and some of you might even decide to run for public office, although I'd warn you about that. [*Laughter*]

Your story is your own and the education that you're receiving will help you advance it. But you're here because you've also accepted the responsibility of having your story as part of the larger American story. Your story is serving your fellow citizens in the wider world. And my message to you today is simple: Your individual service makes all of the difference. You will make the decisions, large and small, that will help shape our future.

So as we dedicate this building where you and future generations will be prepared to make those choices, remember that the true strength of our Nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, it comes from the power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, equality, justice, and unyielding hope.

Those ideals are embedded in our national character because generations of Americans have chosen to live them in their own lives, to advance them through their service and through their sacrifice. This is the truth that Lincoln understood, that pragmatism must serve a common purpose, a higher purpose. That's the legacy that we inherit. And that, in the end, is how government of the people, and by the people, and for the people, will endure in our time.

So thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:28 p.m. in Abraham Lincoln Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Frances C. Wilson, USMC, president, National Defense University, who introduced the president; and Dennis Ross, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for The Gulf and Southwest Asia.

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