

Ronald Reagan
Address at the United States Naval Academy Commencement Exercises
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Congresswoman Holt, Secretary Lehman, Admiral Watkins, General Davis, Admiral Larson, distinguished guests, members of the class of 1985, ladies and gentlemen: I am so proud and honored to be here and to have a 22-gun salute. [Laughter]

But it's an honor for any President to commemorate the graduation of new officers from our service academies, but today is a special privilege for me. I was reminded on the way up here that we have a lot in common. You were the first class to enter the Naval Academy during my term in office, and you might say we've finished a 4-year course together. Now we're both about ready for the real stuff. [Laughter] One thing bothers me, though. I still seem to be climbing that greased monument and you only had to do it once, 3 years ago. (FOOTNOTE) [Laughter]

(The President was referring to the Herndon Monument, an obelisk which freshmen must scale on the first afternoon of Commissioning Week.)

Well, looking out over your faces in this inspiring and historic setting gives reason for confidence in our nation's future. These last 4 years have been spent preparing you to assume responsibility for the protection of our country and all that we stand for. You're part of a noble tradition.

America's independence and freedom, since we were but 13 Colonies huddled along the Atlantic coast, have relied on the bravery, the good sense, and leadership of her officer corps. We've leaned heavily on men of the sea, on our Navy and Marine Corps. Your careers will be no less significant to future generations of Americans than those of past naval heroes.

You will hear during your career, as I've heard during times in my life, that maintaining the military at peak readiness -- keeping our forces trained and supplied with the best weapons and equipment -- is too costly. Well, I say it is too costly for America not to be prepared. As Presidents since Washington have noted: The way to prevent war is to be prepared for it.

And as obvious as that is, it's not always appreciated. There's a story about John Paul Jones' chief gunners mate. It was during the gore and thunder of that most historic battle. He was loading and firing cannon and carrying the wounded to the medical officer, cutting away the tangled rigging. And apparently in the midst of that first fight, John Paul Jones went below momentarily and changed into a new uniform. And as he emerged on deck a voice rang out through the smoke and fire -- it was the British captain asking, "Have you struck your colors?" And the gunners mate, sweat and blood dripping from his body, turned and saw Jones now in his fresh uniform reply: "I have not yet begun to fight." And the gunners mate said, "There's always somebody who didn't get the word." [Laughter]

Now, my chief of staff, Don Regan, is a marine, and he keeps telling me that story's incorrect -- that it was a marine in the rigging and not the gunners mate that said that. [Laughter]

Well, today as throughout our history, it is strength not weakness, resolve not vacillation, that will keep the peace. It's about time that those who place their faith in wishful thinking and good intentions get the word.

During the 1930's I saw America, disillusioned by the First World War, permit our military power to decline. The lack of will on the part of the Western democracies encouraged the totalitarians of that day. Churchill called what followed the most avoidable of all wars, and it turned out to be the most costly of all wars, both in terms of resources and in terms of human suffering.

Americans were spared much of the direct ravages of the Second World War due to geography, the grace of God, and the incredible skill and unmatched courage of our Armed Forces in the desperate months after Pearl Harbor. Fighting a delaying action, often against overwhelming odds, they bought the time needed to build our forces. Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal are names that have gone down in the annals of truly historic battles. I couldn't help but see those names up there on the stadium. Many good men gave their lives in the 1940's for America's unwillingness to prepare in the 1930's. Let me promise you: As long as I'm President that will not happen again.

Since the end of the Second World War, American military might has been an immensely positive force in the world. We used our economic resources to help rebuild the devastated homelands of our allies and of our former enemies as well. Those people, wherever they are in this world, who've enjoyed the rights to speak and to pray and to direct the course of their government through democratic elections owe their freedom to one degree or another to the protection of the United States military. It doesn't take much imagination to know how different things would be had the Soviet Union, not the United States, militarily and economically dominated the world after 1945.

There are some who analyze world events who operate under the assumption that the United States and the Soviet Union are morally equivalent. This reasoning does a great disservice to our forefathers and all the brave individuals throughout our history who have fought and died to keep this country free. The United States is a democratic nation of free people. We are a far more moral and decent land than any totalitarian state, and we should be proud of it.

During the last decade, perhaps as a result of confusion stemming from the Vietnam war, America again permitted its military strength to decline. For the Navy this meant going from almost 1,000 ships in the late 1960's -- or 1970's, I should say -- to under 500 by 1980. In real terms, our overall military spending dropped by 20 percent in the 1970's.

And how did the Soviets seize this historic opportunity for better relations? They raced forward with the largest peacetime military expansion in history. They built almost three times as many ships as we did in the 1970's, turning what had once been a navy aimed at coastal defense into an offensively designed, blue-water navy -- a formidable threat to peace and stability throughout the world. The Soviet's Pacific fleet alone now has more than 500 vessels, including two aircraft carriers and more than 130 submarines.

There had been theories that Soviet belligerence would wane as their relative strength to the United States increased. Those theories went by the wayside in the late 1970's as Soviet advisers and military equipment, along with thousands of Cuban surrogate troops, poured into Africa; Soviet tanks invaded Afghanistan. A weaker America did not mean a more peaceful world. That's about as likely as Army stealing the statue of Tecumseh. [Laughter]

Four years ago, when you were entering Annapolis, we were putting in place a program to rebuild America's weakened defenses, and I'm proud to say that much progress has been made. I know you're ready for the Navy, and I can tell you the Navy is now much more ready for you. And thanks to Secretary of the Navy John Lehman's aggressive leadership, we now have 532 battleforce ships in commission. In 1984 alone, the Navy took delivery of 25 ships. We currently have 102 battleforce ships under construction or conversion in 21 shipyards. By the end of the decade, we'll realize our goal of a 600-ship Navy, which will include 15 deployable aircraft carriers.

And we've taken the steps necessary to make certain that our ships are in fighting trim and able to accomplish their mission. We've moved forward to ferret out waste and inefficiency. And by the way, that's why you hear those stories about outrageously expensive hammers or bolts and things of that kind. We're finding the waste and cutting it out. Those press stories are actually success stories, because by and large they represent our efforts to make the best use of our defense dollar. To make sure our military is ready, we've purchased spare parts, ammunition, better and more efficient equipment, and top-of-the-line weapons systems. Most important, we've got the best darn bunch of officers and crews this Navy or any navy has ever had.

By the end of the 1970's many of our military personnel were demoralized. The purchasing power of their pay had eroded, as had public recognition of their service. Enlisting quality personnel was increasingly difficult, and the reenlistment rates plummeted. We had ships that couldn't leave port for lack of a full crew.

Today that situation has been dramatically reversed. We've not only been meeting our recruitment goals but we're bringing in individuals fully capable of handling the sophisticated equipment and high-tech weapons systems of the modern Navy. Reenlistment rates are up in all of the services. And testing among our sailors and marines suggests that drug use, once a major problem, has dropped more than anyone would have predicted possible. And I've heard of your excellent record in this area, and I commend you for it.

Although I'm an old horse cavalryman myself, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Navy. Back in my former profession, I played a naval officer in "Hellcats of the Navy." And Nancy was a Navy nurse in the same picture. [Laughter] Now, speaking for myself only, if they should send me another script, it probably would be for "Old Man and the Sea." [Laughter]

"Hellcats" was about the submarine force, and I had an experience down in San Diego where we made most of that picture. The submarine training base down there taught me a little about the Navy. It seems that just about the same time we were making the picture, the flyboys over there at the naval air station came over and invited the officers, the submariners, to come over and kind of learn a little about their occupation.

And having gotten them there and then strapped in, they took them up and gave them the works, the whole load. Well, this group of somewhat upset officers -- [laughter] -- returned to the naval base. And then they thought they should return the favor, so they invited the flyboys to come over and learn something about the submarine service.

And they took them out in the submarine, and they were below, and they dived. And then all of a sudden, bells began ringing, and sirens sounding, and fellows were running back and forth, and there were red lights flashing. And it seemed that there was a dial there that said that they were not coming out of their dive. They were going on down. And worriedly they pointed out to these flyers what this meant -- that if it passed that red point on the dial, that was below the ability of the submarine to withstand the pressure.

And then in the midst of all of that excitement, and as it got closer and closer to that red line, one fellow just climbed the ladder into the conning tower and opened the hatch. [Laughter] They were still tied to the dock. [Laughter]

Well, that was just a movie, but the job you'll do is as vital as at any time in the history of our Republic. Our economy is run on fuel and resources from far away countries brought to us by way of the oceans. Even many of our own resources, the oil in Alaska for example, are transported by sea.

And the great democratic nations of the world are tied by shared values and a reliance on the sealanes. Our treaty commitments mean little without access to the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf -- all the great bodies of water.

The challenge is great. Our Navy is meeting a heavier responsibility than we had in the sixties and meeting it with fewer ships. And that means the officers and crew of every vessel must work harder, carry a heavier load, and endure longer, more strenuous cruises. The Ticonderoga, our first Aegis-equipped, guided-missile cruiser, spent over 80 percent of her time underway during a 6½ month maiden cruise in 1984. That same year the aircraft carrier Ranger and her battle group set a record for sustained continuous operations for conventional-powered carrier battle groups -- 121 days, steaming more than 50,000 miles.

Men and women on these and other ships are under great stress, handling advanced weapons systems and sophisticated equipment. And that's all the more reason to salute them after setting a new record for aircraft safety last year. Many who served could easily have better paying civilian jobs. Sailors on the carriers are away from their families 70 percent of the time; yet 60 percent of these fine young people reenlist.

Then there's the New Jersey. In mid-1983 she left Long Beach on what was to have been a 2½ month shakedown cruise in the western Pacific. After traveling to Thailand and the Philippines, she was ordered to Central America. After a few weeks there, she went through the Panama Canal and at high speed proceeded to Beirut, where she remained until May of 1984. She spent 322 days under way, with only three port visits on a voyage that covered 76,000 miles. The only relief for her crew was given by the magnificent contribution of 349 volunteers from the Ready

Reserves. With 3-week shifts aboard the battleship, they permitted much of the New Jersey's crew to rotate home for leave.

In today's Navy, as with the other services, the Reserves are playing an increasingly important role. Who are they? Citizens concerned about the future of this country and determined to do their part. They share their time, energy, and talent to keep America strong, safe, and free.

Sometimes it's hard to find the words to express my heartfelt gratitude for those who serve on active duty and in the Reserves. But it isn't difficult to find the words to explain why they do what they do. It only takes one word -- patriotism. And as Commander in Chief, I am overwhelmed at times by their dedication and courage.

I see this every day. We've enlisted the talent of some Naval Academy graduates at the White House. Robert McFarlane, my national security adviser, his deputy, Admiral John Poindexter, graduated in 1959 and 1958 respectively, and I'm proud to note that their sons are following in their footsteps here at the Academy.

One man who sat where you do now and graduated from the Naval Academy in 1968 is another member of our administration -- Assistant Secretary of Defense James Webb, the most decorated member of his class. James' gallantry as a marine officer in Vietnam won him the Navy Cross and other decorations, including two Purple Hearts. James wrote several books about American service men and women. In his book, "A Sense of Honor," he describes the life that you have chosen. He wrote:

"Servicemen are always in motion, in the air at more than the speed of sound, underwater at depths whales could only dream of, on the surface of the water cruising at 30 miles an hour through crashing seas with another ship almost touching theirs . . . replenishing their oil supplies. Or they are on the ground, in the dirt, testing and training weapons that may someday kill others but today may deal them that same irony. The smallest margin of error separates a live man from a dead man. And in war, of course, they are the first and usually the only ones to pay. The President and the Congress may suffer bad news stories. The military man suffers the deaths of his friends, early and often." End quote.

I want each of you to know that this President understands and appreciates the job that you will be doing. Your lives are precious. You are putting yourselves in harm's way for America's sake, and I will do everything in my power to make certain the country gives you the tools and equipment you need to do your job and to come home safely.

There's a new appreciation for our men and women in military service. One manifestation of this is the effort now going forth to build a Navy memorial in the Nation's Capital, a living tribute to you and all those in the United States Navy, officers and enlisted, who have gone before you.

Whether we remain at peace, whether we remain free, will depend on you -- on your character, your decisions, your leadership. Our ships are in a state of forward deployment, adding both to our deterrence and to our flexibility in dealing with any potential crisis. The theory of deterrence means more than preventing nuclear war. That certainly is an aspect of deterrence, an important

one in which the Navy, with her fleet of Poseidon and Trident submarines, is a leading player. Those men who stay submerged for months at a time, foregoing home and family, are the ultimate guarantees against nuclear attack.

But the spectrum of conflict ranges from terrorism and guerrilla warfare through conventional and nuclear confrontation. The Navy is an intricate part of a wide-ranging strategy of deterrence across this spectrum. We hope to dissuade hostile action at any level by persuading potential aggressors that whatever their target they'll lose more than they will gain. The Navy and Marine Corps' power and forward deployment puts them on the front lines of deterrence. The leadership and judgment of naval officers, serving in the far reaches of the globe, are critical to our success as a nation.

So, let me leave you with these thoughts. Your countrymen have faith in you and expect you to make decisions. The issues will not be black and white, otherwise there would be no decision to make. Do not be afraid to admit and consider your doubts, but don't be paralyzed by them. Be brave. Make your judgment and then move forward with confidence, knowing that although there's never 100-percent certainty, you have honestly chosen what you believe to be, as you have been told by the Admiral, the right course. Do this, and the American people will always back you up.

You're joining the officer ranks of the United States Navy and Marine Corps. You're part of a proud tradition. John Paul Jones, entombed here at Annapolis and enshrined in the hearts of all Americans once said, "I hoisted with my own hands the flag of freedom . . . and I have attended it ever since with veneration on the ocean."

As you go forth in your career, the flag will be in your hands. Carry it and yourselves with pride.

Good luck. God bless you, and I wish you fair winds and following seas.

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<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/52285a.htm>