

Remarks of the Honorable Michael B. Donley Secretary of the Air Force

Class 2011 Graduation—School of Advanced Air and Space Studies Maxwell AFB, 15 June 2011

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, family, friends, faculty and staff, alumni and graduates: It is a pleasure to join you to celebrate the graduation of Class 2011 from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS).

This is a great day for the Air Force and for our nation. Today, we recognize the achievements of the 58 airpower strategists in this year's class, each of whom has completed a rigorous course to earn a master's degree in airpower art and science. Congratulations to you all.

We actually have a double celebration today. As we honor the achievements of the Class of 2011, we are also recognizing another significant milestone—the 20th anniversary of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies.

Over the last 20 years, hundreds of students have graduated from SAASS. SAASS graduates, strategic thinkers who developed and refined their skills here at Maxwell Air Force Base, have applied this education to advise and serve the US Air Force, the US armed forces, and, particularly through our international graduates, advise and serve militaries around the world. The SAASS reputation was further advanced last week when the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity voted unanimously to recommend to the secretary of education approval of the AU PhD program.

My special congratulations and thanks go to the SAASS faculty, staff, and alumni who played a part in reaching this 20-year anniversary. We wish this distinguished institution many more anniversaries in the years and decades to come.

Class 2011

It was almost one year ago when Class 2011 met as a group for the first time. Over the last year, you tackled a very challenging course load, with assignments that included more than 42,000 pages of reading, covering

everything from military theory, to airpower history, to strategy and campaign planning. Fortunately, all of your reading was complemented by in-depth seminars, lively discussions, and serious writing projects, including a master's thesis.

But you didn't spend all of your time at the AU Library. Your education in military strategy also included a seven-day staff ride in France. By visiting Verdun and sites in Normandy—where thousands of soldiers fought, and thousands still lie in final repose, between the crosses, row on row—I know you learned lessons you will never forget. Not the least of these lessons is keeping in mind the seriousness of the military art as a profession and developing an even deeper understanding that a leader's decisions, wise or unwise, have far-reaching consequences—for citizens, for militaries, and for nations.

But beyond your work in class, my sincerest hope is that the personal and professional relationships you have developed with your fellow students will be an enduring benefit of your year together. You have forged bonds with colleagues across the Air Force, but also across the services, and beyond our national borders. I suspect that as your careers progress, you will have cause to call upon one another from time to time. These relationships, and the mutual understanding you have gained, are likely to pay dividends for years to come.

Importance of Professional Military Education

Now it's fair to ask, why does the Air Force think it's worthwhile to take a second year away from your standard career path in order to pursue professional military education?

My answer is simple. I believe that educating strategic thinkers is just as critical as maintaining our technological edge. Cultivating our best thinkers is part of our investment in people, and the success of our Air Force and our national security is directly related to the quality of our people.

In the Air Force, we sometimes have a tendency to focus on the awesome technology that surrounds us everywhere you look—the aircraft and the satellites, the state-of-the-art communications and computer systems, and the missiles and other weapons systems. But no matter how advanced our systems and technology, we still depend on the education, training, commitment—and ultimately, the quality of our Airmen who operate

and maintain these systems and put them to work in support of our nation's defense.

It's impossible to precisely measure the value of sending people to school, providing them the luxury of time to think and learn. But we do know that while military training, tactics, and weapons may change, the critical thinking skills you've sharpened during your education here will always be mission essential. Your ability to think strategically will help you help our Air Force deal with evolving conditions and emerging threats as they develop. And it's virtually guaranteed, you will be dealing with change.

It's astounding to think about the pace and magnitude of technological change since the first SAASS graduates earned their diplomas 20 years ago. In 1992, the Internet revolution had not yet taken hold; cell phone communication was just taking off, if you didn't mind carrying a phone the size of a large brick; GPS was the gee-whiz technology of the Gulf War; nobody had a computer tablet; tweeting was something only birds do. Communication was slower, and, depending on your perspective, sharing information was more difficult.

These observations don't even take into account the fluctuating geopolitical dynamics prompted by the end of the Cold War, or the rise of asymmetric threats around the world. Considering all of the changes we've experienced, who can say what the next 20 years will bring?

As the Air Force and the other services fulfill today's mission requirements, we also have a responsibility to plan for the future. But it is a simple fact that no matter how much planning we do, the future is defined by uncertainty. In trying to determine what's coming around the corner and how to shape our forces accordingly, we must frequently use partial information, intermingled with limited experience, combined with inherently flawed judgment.

In fact, Secretary Gates often says that since Vietnam, we have an absolutely perfect record in forecasting where we will use military force next. We have never once gotten it right! This doesn't say much for our ability as prognosticators, but it should give us all the more reason to find value in professional military education. We need professional military strategists who have analytical skills and experience; who have already thought through the implications of alternative futures; and who have a depth of understanding and historical perspective that bring strong foundations to contingency planning in response to dynamic changes in the security environment.

As an airpower strategist, you will be in a position to help shape your Air Force of the future. Sooner than you may think, you will be having an impact on the difficult decisions facing defense policymakers.

The need for strategic thinkers is not a new requirement. Thousands of years of military history describe the pioneering work of your predecessors, scholars, and practitioners of the art of war. But as we face today's strategic environment and budget challenges, it's clear we need our strategic thinkers more than ever.

Air Force Challenges

So let's talk through a few of the strategic issues that Air Force leaders are grappling with today, issues which will continue to play out and which will certainly affect you in the days ahead.

While this is undoubtedly an exciting time to be part of the Air Force and the defense community, it is also a time of transition. DoD civilian and military leadership changes are on the way. By next month, we expect to have a new secretary of defense. Later this fall, we will have a new chairman and vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At the same time, our nation continues to face both a complex global strategic environment and an ongoing budget crisis.

Our Air Force continues to provide the nation's unmatched *global vigilance, reach, and power* across the full spectrum of operations. From the humanitarian relief operations supporting our Japanese friends in need; to the ongoing stability and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the no-fly-zone enforcement and protection of the civilian population in Libya; and to the continuous air sovereignty, space, cyber and nuclear-deterrence missions—the speed, precision, and versatility of the US Air Force is being tested and proven daily.

But many difficult choices loom on the horizon. We cannot ignore the serious long-term financial challenges confronting our nation, the Department of Defense, and the Air Force. In fact, last year, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen, identified the national debt as the single biggest threat to our national security. The Air Force and our sister services have already made a long-term commitment to finding budget efficiencies, including \$33 billion identified by the Air Force, but we know that efficiencies alone will not be enough.

The president's recent speech on fiscal policy made it very clear that defense expenditures will not be exempt from further efforts to reduce spending at the federal level. Of note, the timeline for the president's goal of finding \$400 billion in defense savings extends to 2023, confirming the long-term commitment that will be required to get our nation's fiscal house in order.

As defense professionals, we are in the business of managing risk, and this process involves setting priorities and making trade-offs. We have to make smart choices that enable us to meet a range of potential contingencies that we cannot accurately predict, and to identify and hedge against those areas where our nation may be willing to accept more risk. We need strategic thinkers like you to help us consider our options in full and help us make the right choices for our future.

In the Air Force, we have determined that balance is the key feature of our resourcing strategy to accommodate the uncertain and fiscally challenging future. Balance among core functions; balance among force structure, readiness and modernization; and balance among our active duty, reserve, and Air National Guard components.

Uncertainty in the international environment calls for us to build a balanced force with the flexibility and versatility that enables our forces to operate effectively across the potential spectrum of operations. This includes the enabling capabilities on which the entire joint force depends at any level of conflict—capabilities like C4, mobility and air refueling, personnel recovery, and ISR, to name a few.

It also reflects the need for a broad range of capabilities. For example, while we are currently reinforcing our counterinsurgency capabilities, we're also building the joint strike fighter. While working on command and control for missile defense, we're building the light-attack armed reconnaissance and light-mobility aircraft to more effectively train nascent air forces. While recapitalizing the tanker fleet, we're strengthening space situational awareness and cyber defense. And, while building up language and cultural competency, we continue research on directed-energy weapons.

Of course, building a balanced force also has a temporal dimension. We must balance our operational focus on winning today's fight with the necessary investments for tomorrow's fight, and preserve the personnel, training, acquisition, and other institutional foundations upon which our capabilities are built.

Anticipating the challenges and decisions ahead, Air Force leaders have also begun a discussion on how best to balance resource allocation across our force structure, our readiness, and our plans for modernization at whatever level of resources we are provided.

Force structure is shorthand for the overall size and composition of our forces. It includes active duty, National Guard, and reserve personnel strengths; all of our core functions; and the organizational- and unit-level framework in which our capabilities are embedded—the commands, numbered air forces, wings, and squadrons. If our force structure is too large given the resources available, then we risk not being able to sustain the costs of ownership, such as providing for pay and benefits, training, and materiel readiness. If it is too small, we could unintentionally drive some mission areas and career fields to unsustainably low levels, lose the flexibility to accommodate new or evolving missions, or risk our ability to sustain expeditionary operations.

Readiness refers to the near-term preparedness to generate military capabilities. Readiness measures whether we have the right number of personnel, proficient in the right skill sets, sufficiently educated and trained, and available, and mission-capable equipment, which is well maintained and supported by a healthy supply chain, with adequate stocks of munitions and spare parts. If we allow readiness to slip, we risk not being prepared for the rapidly developing contingencies that characterize the current security environment. And shortages in flying hours, other training, and spare parts would demoralize our Airmen and threaten our ability to retain a quality force. But if we focus too much on near-term readiness and on preparedness exclusively for today's fights, we risk undermining the longer-term investment and modernization necessary to sustain our technological edge and to build the Air Force we will need to meet future challenges.

Modernization refers to the technological improvements needed to maintain military advantage and prevent obsolescence of equipment, weapon systems, and forces. If we fail to modernize our forces at an adequate rate, the near-term costs of maintaining and upgrading our legacy fleets will grow, crowding out longer-term investment; our war-fighting advantages in technology could shrink, and the costs of new equipment would likely increase further and be stretched out even more. But if we put too many resources into modernization as budgets decline, we could risk driving the size of the Air Force to unacceptably low levels and perhaps not sufficiently sized or ready for the unforeseen contingencies immediately ahead.

Finally, we are committed to finding balance in the Total Force. I don't need to tell you that the Air Force depends on the Air Force Reserve components, and that we will remain committed to the Total Force enterprise—the powerful combination of the active duty and reserve components that together make up the United States Air Force. We do, however, have an obligation to consider whether we have the right balance and mix of missions across the components, as well as how we can best organize that mix to maximize the capability and efficiency of our Total Force.

As you know, bringing balance to the force is an iterative process. It will require us to keep a critical eye on the changing strategic, technological, and resource environments over the long haul, as details are adjusted and calibrated along the way. The task ahead will be far from easy, but to be successful, it will require all of our best efforts, starting with the help of our best thinkers.

Charge to the Graduates—Make it Count

Over the years, there has been a growing understanding throughout the Air Force that it's good to have a trained airpower strategist on staff. When it comes to determining future assignments, there are usually about three times as many requests for SAASS graduates than can be met, so it's clear your skills are considered a precious commodity.

Here's one testimonial. Many of you may know or remember retired lieutenant general Donald Lamontagne, who became the commander of Air University in the summer of 2001. I'm told that when terrorists attacked the United States on 9/11, calls started coming in to General Lamontagne's office. Commanders and members of the Air Staff wanted to know, "Where are the SAASS grads? We need them now!"

It's commonly accepted that SAASS graduates go where the hard thinking about war and security is done. So I am about to issue a challenge to you. You wouldn't be here if we didn't consider you to be a heavy hitter. Now we want you to make this count.

I call upon you to demonstrate what this year-long opportunity to think and learn has delivered. You will have the opportunity to apply what you've learned and put it into practice. You are in a position to help your Air Force and our armed forces make the right choices as we reshape ourselves for the future.

We need your innovative thinking, and we need you to keep learning. We need you to help us make the right strategic choices for our country. We need you to help us out-think those who are devising ways to prey upon our vulnerabilities. We need you to continue building professional relationships and to continue engaging with one another and members of the defense community. And as every line in the federal budget falls under scrutiny, we need you to show that our investment in your professional military education was money well spent—our future ability to invest in the intellectual component of the Air Force depends on it.

Conclusion

Our Air Force is a world-class institution. As its stewards, we are committed to ensuring that the United States continues to have the world's finest air force for generations to come.

I say to the graduates of Class 2011, make this experience at SAASS count. Take this education, this preparation, this experience, and do something great for our Air Force and for our country. SAASS graduates, we need you now, and we will need you for many years to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud and humbled to be associated with today's graduates and with all of the dedicated men and women, and their families, who serve this great institution. Graduates, it is an honor to serve with you in the world's finest Air Force.

Honorable Michael B. Donley
Secretary of the Air Force