

6-19-00 Commencement
Merchant Marine Academy

**Merchant Marine Academy Commencement Address
By First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**King's Point, New York
June 19, 2000**

Thank you very much, Secretary Slater. It is a particular pleasure for me to be introduced by the secretary. I have known him since he was about the age of the graduates and have watched him as he has assumed greater and greater responsibility and discharged it in exemplary fashion. Admiral Stewart; Acting Maritime Administrator Bonnie Green; Panama Consul General Garcia de Frochaux; flag and general officers; Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli; honorary degree recipients Frank Braynard and Malcolm McLean; Valedictorian Adam Vokac and President Pat Long; midshipmen; faculty; parents; alumni; family; friends; guests; and, most important, the first King's Point graduates of the 21st century. It is a great pleasure and honor for me to be here at what truly is one of the best kept secrets of our country and certainly of our military services. I join with prayers and best wishes for fellow graduate Mike Price. I extend my congratulations to you all for a job well done and four years—and possibly five—of extremely difficult and demanding study.

In addition to the studies that bring you to Tombfield today, I know that some of you have helped America stand up to bloodshed and hatred in Kosovo. Some of you were the first on hand to offer aid in the hours after the Egypt Air tragedy. Two of you have come from the Republic of Panama, which has assumed control and authority over the canal. And all you have survived license week and finished one of the toughest, most rewarding voyages of your lives. I know that you are very proud of yourselves and all of us here today believe that you have demonstrated the leadership and commitment that this academy was established to foster.

I know there were days when your patience was wearing thin, and you were so exhausted you thought you might not make it. And I'm just talking about your parents. I am grateful to see these stands filled with parents and family members, and loved ones and friends, who have supported and sacrificed for you. I know that we have already asked them to stand. But being a parent of a nearly graduating college student, I think they deserve another round of applause and I would join you all in providing that to them.

You know that my husband mentioned to me last night that Rodney Slater had also introduced him recently when he spoke at the Coast Guard Academy. But I pointed out that there was a difference: I am speaking to the academy that *won* the Secretary's Cup!

I also want to thank Admiral Stewart, who has brought the can-do spirit of a Marine Corps general here, and worked tirelessly on behalf of his midshipmen. I have never met someone who has been both a general and admiral before; it shows what a unique blend of leadership he has. And he has even filled me in on some of your most sacred traditions. I wasn't able to be here a few weeks ago to pitch pennies into the pool, but I did search under every sofa and inside every desk in the White House, and was able to scrounge up my own 100 pennies to bring for the anchor man today. I will ask you to pass them on for me.

I also want to thank Captain Kenneth R. Force and the Regimental Band for that First Lady March. I appreciate greatly the tribute that you pay to me and my predecessors. I understand that I am the fourth first lady to visit King's Point, following in the footsteps of Eleanor Roosevelt, Bess Truman, and Maime Eisenhower. Now, when Mrs. Roosevelt came in 1944, and she wrote a column about her visit, she drew a conclusion about your lives that I am sure is still applicable. "I decided," she wrote, that "they never slept." Well, I am sure that there has not been much time for sleep in these last years, but you stand in the tradition of the midshipmen that Mrs. Roosevelt came to pay tribute to.

She spoke about the cadet midshipmen who were, at that time, waging freedom's fight in World War II. During the war years, Mrs. Roosevelt kept a prayer by her bedside: "Help me to remember, somewhere out there a man died for me today." Somewhere out there, in the years that this academy was established, we know that many have paid the ultimate sacrifice and all have been willing to travel for, live for and die for the liberty, democracy and prosperity we enjoy today.

That was brought home to me very forcefully during the commemorations around D-day, when the President and I were in Europe to mark the 50th anniversary of D-Day. We boarded the only running Liberty ship—the S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien—and we were greeted by its crew. They were mostly retired World War II seamen and officers in their 70s. And they talked, with great emotion, about how they—and their ship—had withstood brutal attacks to bring troops and equipment to Normandy, and help bring the war to an end.

I learned that day that the S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien was named for a seafarer who, along with his five brothers, helped win the first battle of the American Revolution. He began the journey of those men and women who have taken to the high seas to serve our country. That is the journey of a King's Point graduate—from the 142 whose hallowed names forever echo through this campus to those who sailed to Kuwait and Somalia to those of you graduating today.

I know you could have chosen schools that were easier, and jobs with far better stock options. But you chose to defend our security by serving in America's armed forces or its reserves. At a time when more than 90 percent of our international trade comes by sea, you have chosen to look across the oceans to build America's prosperity. And you have chosen to stand up for the values that have defined us as a nation.

Just as you have chosen, so too must America choose. We have stood at such a crossroads before. After World War I, we looked inward—and a generation paid a terrible price. After World War II, by contrast, we looked outwards and our mariners helped point the way—toward engagement, not abandonment of America's leadership around the world. Toward the Marshall Plan to help old allies and enemies alike rebuild as trading partners and strategic friends. And toward the understanding that the future of our children's lives depended on extending peace and prosperity, democracy and freedom to every part of the world.

And now we must choose again. In this time of great prosperity, will it be enough for Americans to be satisfied with America's high standard of living? To look inward at our

material possessions. To be very happy with where we are without any sense of where we are going. Will we continue to tear down the walls that divide us or will we permit them to grow ever higher? Commerce and communications have moved us into the inevitable position of being part of a world and being interdependent in ways that even our parents and certainly our grandparents could not have imagined. We are watching as the way we live and work is literally being transformed, and these changes bring both the promise of progress and the threat and peril that comes whenever great changes occur.

The same technology that has revolutionized the merchant marine can be used by hostile nations and terrorists to threaten soldiers and civilians alike. The new global markets that are bringing prosperity to millions and millions of Americans still leave too many of our own country men and women unsure how to navigate this new world. And we know that many others throughout the world similarly feel left behind. The transportation networks that carry goods and people more quickly than ever can also bring deadly disease and pestilence into our homes and neighborhoods.

So what will our choice be? Will try once again to build a fortress and turn our backs at the water's edge? Or chart a new path across this global age?

Over the past seven years, I have had the privilege of meeting many of your fellow servicemen and women, all part of the best-trained, best-equipped, best-led armed forces anywhere and anytime in history. I saw them bringing health and hope to people in Central America who had watched their lives swept away in floods and mudslides. I have seen them on patrol in Kosovo and Bosnia, trying to draw a line to stop the ethnic bloodshed and cleansing. I have walked the lines in meetings and bases and on ships and looked into the faces of the young men and women who are on America's first line of defense. I have seen every race and skin color, I have heard every accent—I know that our armed forces represent us at our very best. They are in effect the face that America puts not only forward but reflected back inward as well.

We know, however, we face great challenges in keeping outstanding men and women like you in our nation's service and keeping our forces ready to fight and win. We have just funded the biggest military pay raise in 20 years. But there is more to be done if we are to keep America's armed forces a competitive environment to attract young men and women to a career. We can start by improving military housing, and ensuring that no service member ever again needs food stamps to make ends meet. And we can sustain a strong U.S. owned, U.S. built, and U.S. crewed maritime force for the global economy.

We as civilians stand with you in making the choices before us. Will we as a united nation stand behind our armed forces 100 percent, wherever they are? Will we use our diplomacy to resolve critical conflicts before we ask our young men and women to walk or sail in harm's way?

I think we have a good understanding of the complexities of this world we find ourselves in, as we still are trying to construct the kind of diplomatic and military strategy that will stand us in good stead throughout this century and the wake and the end of the Cold War.

When we support talks between the leaders of North and South Korea, we reduce the chance that Americans will ever again be called to fight and die on the Korean peninsula. When we stand with leaders in the Middle East or Bosnia or Northern Ireland as they make hard choices for peace, we help bring security to regions of strategic, economic, and moral importance. But we cannot do this unless we stop the downward slide in funding for American diplomacy. Just as our military strength is critical to America's future, so is our diplomatic strength.

I do not have to remind any of you in uniform that the costliest peace exacts a lower price than the cheapest war. In this new century, we must choose to face up to new threats from terrorism, international crime, chemical and biological weapons, the spread of nuclear proliferation. We've seen the consequences from embassy bombings in Africa to a New Year's plot stopped on our own border. We've seen the tools of terrorism become cheaper, deadlier and easier to get. It is time for the international community to join us in cracking down on terrorists wherever they may be found from Africa to Athens, and for those who harbor them—from arms dealers to bomb-makers to cyber-criminals to rogue states. If the international community will not join hands with the United States to stand against terrorism, we will reap a whirlwind. We must send a clear message and our friends and allies and any who wish to be must stand against terrorists wherever they are found.

We can lead in promoting arms control and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, and we should start by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in the United States Senate. The alternative is a world of no rules, no limits and no end to arms races. I can think that as we look forward we are going to face a lot of hard choices in many parts of the world. At the top of that list will be our choices about how to work with Russia and China. Either in a way that moves them towards being reliable partners, or winds up making them enemies in cold, or heaven forbid, hot wars. We can work with our allies and partners to block missiles and other weapons of mass destruction from spreading, or we can try to go it alone, turning our backs on the dangers posed in places like India and Pakistan.

Security in this century will come from as much known knowledge and prosperity as from warships and guns. You must for all of our sakes remain vigilant, but those of us at home have to work just as hard to give every young person a stake in the future.

We as a nation cannot afford to be an island of prosperity. You have seen in your sea year 18 countries. You know that trade and open markets are tools that we use to build prosperity at home and raise living standards around the world. If you lead the way, we can shape this new global economy, not be shaped by it.

So when we look at these choices, it is not just on a grand scale that these issues are raised. It is not just for those who lead us in the military and the government to worry about what happens on the Indian sub-continent or in the Balkans or the decisions that are made by leaders in China and Russia. There are also ways that we Americans here at home can make decisions about how we will lead and the values we will put forth to the rest of the world. And each of us here can take a stand against prejudice and bigotry everywhere we see it within our

own borders. We can exemplify the values of mutual respect by reaching out to those who are different from us to build bridges between us.

We know that when the humanity of any is threatened, whether in Rwanda or Sierra Leone or places closer to home like Central Park, that a little bit is taken away from each of us, because we have either turned a blind eye or walked away from standing up against the worst in human nature. It matters greatly how the United States conducts itself, and each time any of you wears the uniform you will assume—either for active or reserved duty—you are in effect exemplifying America.

When I was in Bosnia, shortly after the Dayton Accords, I was helicoptered out to two small outposts to greet and thank the young men and women who were securing the peace. As I met them and listened to their stories, I knew that if others around the world could see America at its best, perhaps we could influence their own views and values about what was possible. If they could see young Americans from all backgrounds working together, maybe they could put down their own hatreds and biases and try to reach across to help one another out.

I have remembered that lesson in the years since I have traveled on behalf of our country with the President or on my own. I have often talked about what our military represents. In places like Northern Ireland, where thankfully peace seems to be holding; where two communities have lived as though they were separated by hundreds of miles instead of mere blocks in city neighborhoods; where they had never really gotten to know one another. So it is not just the work that you do that you have been prepared to do as you graduate, but the values that you will carry with you.

When President Roosevelt dedicated the Academy, he predicted that it “will spur on present and future generations of our men of the sea to even greater achievement. It will equip them to be skilled navigators and engineers, worthy of the great vessels they will sail and of respect in every port of the world—men of whom all Americans will be proud.”

Well I am very proud and honored to have been asked to address you today. As you each walk across this stage, you are ending one journey and starting another that links you back in time to Jeremiah O’Brien. You will be guided not just by high tech navigational devices, but by the beliefs and values instilled here, by your courage, camaraderie, and commitment, by the examples you set, by your willingness to serve.

It is always impossible for any of us to know where our life will take us, and for each of you, where the waters or winds will take you. So I wish you a journey filled with big dreams and great adventures, accompanied by the love of family and friends. Filled with laughter and fun. Enjoy the ride. And “God steer thee well, King’s Point.”

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