

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT M. GATES
2011 NOTRE DAME COMMENCEMENT SPEECH
SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2011**

Thank you, Father Jenkins. Members of the faculty, trustees, proud parents, distinguished guests, and, most of all to the class of 2011 – thank you for having me here. I am truly honored to be your graduation speaker, and flattered to now be your classmate.

It's an extraordinary privilege to be in the company of this year's honorary degree recipients. I'm joined by eminent scientists and mathematicians, human rights advocates, leaders in business, church officials, and the person you're perhaps most excited to see in this stadium: Lou Holtz.

Lou started as a backfield coach at the College of William and Mary at the same time I began college there as a freshman, exactly 50 years ago this August. That dates us both. William and Mary wasn't exactly a football powerhouse – and the head football coach later would find far more success as a banker. But from those humble beginnings, Lou went on to lead the Fighting Irish to a national title, and I can now say that I once commanded the attention of thousands in Notre Dame Stadium – at least for the first minute of this speech.

Now, to the reason why we are here, the class of 2011: Congratulations. You have worked hard to get here. Your parents are full of pride – even if their bank accounts are now empty. Standing here, I am truly humbled by the fact that I am following six sitting U.S. presidents who have delivered graduation speeches here at Notre Dame. I am also keenly aware that you may have been hoping for a more entertaining choice for commencement speaker. As an Observer editorial said, “Robert Gates is not Stephen Colbert. Nor is he Bono. He has never appeared on the cover of Entertainment Weekly or been named one of People Magazine's ‘Sexiest Men Alive.’” Like I needed that reality check!

I entered government service 45 years ago this summer and will retire as Secretary of Defense next month, just as you are beginning the next chapter in your lives. Even though today we mark your departure from this campus, you will always be Notre Dame. And, as Father Jenkins has said, “even among those who did not go to Notre Dame, even among those who do not share the Catholic faith, there is a special expectation, a special hope, for what Notre Dame can accomplish in the world.”

That's because, starting with the first graduates 162 years ago, “Domers” have gone forward from this campus with a deep sense of duty, a strong intellectual and spiritual grounding, and a commitment to helping their communities, their nation, and the world. There is also a long and proud tradition of Domers serving this nation in uniform, going back to the Civil War when Father Sorin sent chaplains to serve in the famed Irish Brigade, and continuing to this day.

During World War II, the school practically turned over this campus to the Navy, which established one of four Midshipman Training Centers here that commissioned more than 12,000 U.S. Naval Officers. Father Hesburgh's bold leadership ensured that ROTC continued to have a home here at Notre Dame throughout the tumult of the Vietnam era. And this weekend, with the commissioning of ROTC graduates from the class of 2011, another 65 officers join the ranks of Domers serving in our military. I want to thank those new officers for your willingness to come forward and serve our country in uniform during a time of war. In making this commitment, you've distinguished yourselves in a profound and honorable way.

But it is the task of all of this year's graduates to continue this university's tradition of public-mindedness. Most of you have already participated in service projects while here at Notre

Dame. Volunteering for a good cause is important, there is no doubt about that. And as you graduate today, I encourage you to discover for yourself what it is that drives you, what course or career path engages your head and your heart and your passion, and then pursue it with all your energy and commitment. But I also want to ask you to consider taking an active role in the life of this country by committing yourself to spending at least part of your life in public service.

The problems we as a nation are grappling with are well-known: steep fiscal imbalances and mounting debt, which could develop into a deep crisis for our nation. At the same time, we face a complex and unpredictable international security environment that includes a major war in Afghanistan, winding up the war in Iraq, revolution throughout the Middle East, new rising powers, nuclear proliferation in Iran and Korea, the continued threat of terrorism, and more.

While the challenges I've described are unique to this moment in history, their scale is no greater than others this country has dealt with and successfully overcome. We have battled slavery and intolerance in our own society, and on the global stage prevailed against Nazi Germany and Soviet Communism. We have seen periods of painful economic collapse give way to renewed and unprecedented prosperity. Our progress has sometimes been unsteady, and sometimes too slow. Winston Churchill purportedly said during World War II, "you can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they've tried everything else."

But our national story has been, and still is, the envy of the world. Indeed, the death of Osama Bin Laden after a decade-long manhunt by the United States reminded us earlier this month that, as President Obama said, when faced with tough times "we do not falter. We don't turn back. We pick ourselves up and we get on with the hard task of keeping our country strong and safe."

Still, we cannot assume, because things have worked out in the past, that the problems we face will eventually resolve themselves. We need the active involvement of our best, most honest citizens, to make our democracy work – whether as candidates for public office, as civil servants, or as members of our armed forces.

And no matter how many smart or talented individuals make up our government, in order to make progress in confronting our most pressing problems, we need leaders able to make tough choices and to work together. President Kennedy, who in the early 1960s inspired so many young people – like me – to public service, was fond of pointing out that, in the mid-19th century, some of the finest statesmen this nation has ever produced served in Congress. Men of prodigious talent such as Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Thomas Hart Benton and Stephen Douglas, among others. Yet Kennedy would note that this group, despite their profound integrity and skill, could not ultimately stave off a bloody, and ruinous, civil war.

Today, we face challenges that do not threaten America's unity and very existence as directly, but they are in some ways just as complex. And if there's consensus in Washington on one thing, it is that we cannot put off dealing with this crisis any longer. But going forward, we must be clear-eyed about the fact that there are no painless answers.

As we make the tough choices needed to put this country's finances in order and to secure our future prosperity – including the sacrifices that will be required of all Americans – there will undoubtedly be calls to shrink America's role in the world – for us to sharply reduce our international commitments and the size and capabilities of our military. I would like to address these calls, in this place and at this time.

A recurring theme in America for nearly a century has been a tendency to conclude after each war that the fundamental nature of man and the iron realities of nations have changed. That history in all of its unpredictable and tragic dimensions has come to a civilized end. That we will

no longer have to confront foreign enemies with size, steel, and strength. Another tendency, repeated over the last century, has been for Americans repeatedly to avert their eyes in the belief that remote events elsewhere in the world need not engage this country – from the assassination of an Austrian archduke in unknown Bosnia–Herzegovina in 1914 to the rise of a group called the Taliban in Afghanistan and their alliance with an organization called Al Qaeda in the 1990s. The lessons of history tell us we must not diminish our ability or our determination to deal with the threats and challenges on the horizon, because ultimately they will need to be confronted.

If history – and religion – teach us anything, it is that there will always be evil in the world, people bent on aggression, oppression, satisfying their greed for wealth and power and territory, or determined to impose an ideology based on the subjugation of others and the denial of liberty to men and women. More perhaps than any other Secretary of Defense, I have been a strong advocate of soft power – of the critical importance of diplomacy and development as fundamental components of our foreign policy and national security. But make no mistake, the ultimate guarantee against the success of aggressors, dictators, and terrorists in the 21st century, as in the 20th, is hard power –the size, strength, and global reach of the United States military.

Beyond the current wars, our military credibility, commitment, and presence are required to sustain alliances, to protect trade routes and energy supplies, and to deter would-be adversaries from making the kind of miscalculations that so often lead to war.

All of these things happen mostly out of sight and out of mind to the average American, and thus are taken for granted. But they all depend on a properly armed, trained and funded American military, which cannot be taken for granted.

To be sure, a strong military cannot exist without a strong economy underpinning it. At some point fiscal insolvency at home translates into strategic insolvency abroad. As part of America getting its financial house in order, the size of our defense budget must be addressed. That means culling more bureaucratic excess and overhead, taking a hard look at personnel levels and costs, and reexamining missions and capabilities to separate the desirable or optional from the essential. But throughout this process we should keep in mind historian Donald Kagan’s observation that the preservation of peace depends upon those states seeking that goal having both the preponderant power and the will to accept the burdens and responsibilities required to achieve it. And we must not forget what Winston Churchill once said, that “the price of greatness is responsibility...the people of the United States cannot escape world responsibility.”

One of the great women of American history, Abigail Adams, wrote her son, John Quincy Adams, during the war of the American Revolution. She wrote: “These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed... Great necessities call out great virtues.”

We live in such a time of “great necessities.” For my entire life the United States has been the most economically dynamic, powerful country and government in the world. The indispensable nation. It still is all those things, and indeed, as I’ve traveled the world over the last four and a half years, I have been struck by the number of countries – from Europe to Southeast Asia – who want to forge closer ties with our military, and want the United States to play a bigger, not smaller, role as partners providing stability, security and prosperity across the globe. But there is no question that our ability to lead, and our economic strength – a given for nearly three quarters of a century – are being tested by fiscal problems at home and rising powers and emergent threats abroad. Your lives will be defined by how we respond to these challenges.

I just quoted what Abigail Adams told her son, John Quincy. I will close with a quote

from a letter that her husband, John Adams, sent to one of their other sons, Thomas Boylston Adams. Adams wrote: “Public business, my son, must always be done by somebody. It will be done by somebody or another. If wise men decline it, others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not.”

To this I would add: if America declines to lead in the world, others will not. So to the Notre Dame class of 2011, I would ask the wisest and most honest of you to find a way to serve and to lead our country to new greatness at home and around the globe.

Thank you.

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