

Harvard ROTC Commissioning Ceremony  
Tercentenary Theatre, Harvard University  
Wednesday, June 3, 2009

President Drew Gilpin Faust

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*As prepared for delivery.*

Thank you for inviting me to join you. It is a privilege to congratulate you on your commissioning and a privilege to welcome our distinguished guests to Harvard—your families and friends, Medal of Honor recipient Captain Thomas Hudner, Captain Darnell Whitt, and, especially, General David Petraeus, who greatly honors us with his presence. He represents for us all a model of service, of achievement and of devotion to country. But for our gathering here today, he embodies something else of particular significance: the ideal of the soldier-scholar. There are many dimensions of General Petraeus's extraordinary leadership, but one of the most important is that he is a thinker. "The most powerful tool any soldier carries," he has written, "is not his weapon but his mind." The Harvard seniors to be commissioned today are also soldier-scholars. This is the identity you have embraced here for the last four years, uniting the demands of two challenging programs into a life that has required dedication and commitment—late nights studying biochemistry or economics; drills at dawn. You have been serious students of the sciences, social sciences and humanities and have at the same time met and even surpassed every demand placed upon you by rigorous military training.

Now you are being commissioned—officially recognized not just as soldiers, but as leaders. I want to urge you today—even as you prepare to leave these university halls—to remain soldier-scholars, to use your intellectual gifts and your education as important dimensions of your leadership.

We live in a time when knowledge is key to every part of our society and its progress. This is why we have watched so many of our faculty depart to Washington this spring as President Obama has called upon them to join him in public service—on every issue from economic recovery to climate change, to health care reform, to weapons procurement, to financial regulation.

Your education has equipped you with knowledge and the capacity to continue to acquire knowledge in the variety of specialized fields you will pursue.

But, if we at Harvard have succeeded, your education in the liberal arts has also done something more. It has taught you to think, to analyze, to make judgments—to turn information into understanding.

Your education has introduced you to the big picture – the sweep of history, of philosophy, of cultural difference and change. This is the context that necessarily shapes war and those who bear responsibility for it.

War is arguably the most consequential activity any nation or society can undertake. That is why I have made it the focus of my work as a historian. General Petraeus and I share a particular interest in Ulysses S. Grant. War represents the proverbial moment of truth—where we define ourselves, our most fundamental purposes and values.

The role of the soldier-scholar is never to let either the military or society forget the big picture—these broad issues so fundamental to understanding both our opponents and ourselves. I want to challenge you to bring to the work of war the truths you as soldier-scholars are uniquely prepared to understand, the questions you are uniquely equipped to pose.

Two months ago, we had lunch in Mass Hall, together with the ROTC cadets from other classes, and you presented me with a book by a soldier-scholar: Craig Mullaney's *The Unforgiving Minute*. Mullaney chronicles his experiences at West Point, as a Rhodes Scholar, as a US Naval Academy instructor and as a platoon leader in Afghanistan. It is significant, I believe, that he subtitles his book "The Education of a Soldier."

Today I want to reciprocate and mark your commissioning with a gift to each of you of a book published several decades ago now. It is in fact mentioned by Mullaney in his memoir, I was delighted to see, but I chose it because it so deeply affected my education as I began teaching and writing about war as a young scholar.

It is a book that was written here at Harvard by a man who was then a professor of government. It is Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*.

"War," Michael Walzer remind us, "is the hardest place; if comprehensive and consistent moral judgments are possible there, they are possible everywhere."

To you as soldier-scholars, we entrust this enormous complexity. To you we assign the challenges of this "hardest place." We hope we have helped to ready you for whatever lies ahead, and we thank you for your service—to us and to the nation.

Congratulations!