



For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
May 23, 2007

President Bush Delivers Commencement Address at United States Coast Guard Academy

Alumni Building
United States Coast Guard Academy
New London, Connecticut

 [Fact Sheet: Keeping America Safe From Attack](#)

11:41 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, all. Admiral Allen, thank you for that kind introduction. Admiral Burhoe, congratulations on your promotion. Academy staff and faculty, Congressman Chris Shays, state and local officials, distinguished guests, proud families and, most importantly, members of the Class of 2007: thanks for having me.

It's a privilege to stand with the future leaders of the United States Coast Guard. Before you receive your degrees today, I want to make sure that you have learned your "indoc." What is the Coast Guard?

CADETS: Mr. President, the Coast Guard is the hard nucleus about which the Navy forms in times of war, sir! (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: I probably shouldn't relay that to the Secretary of the Navy. (Laughter.)

I see a few "RCF Warriors" out there. Some of you earned demerits for failing to correct your storage [sic], others got caught crawling under the fence on your way to Connecticut College. (Laughter.) However you got bagged, help has arrived. (Laughter.) In keeping with longstanding tradition, I hereby absolve all cadets who are on restriction for minor conduct offenses. (Applause.) I'll leave it to Admiral Burhoe to define exactly what "minor" means. (Laughter.)

More than 6,000 young Americans applied to join the Coast Guard Academy Class of 2007, and today just 228 will walk across this stage to receive your diploma and commission. You're a select few, and each of you worked really hard to get to this moment: survived R-Day, Swab Summer, and Friday morning drill practice with a kind and gentle soul, Chief Dillmann. (Laughter.) You learned to brace up, do orderlies, square meals, and eat "hamsters" with your "eyes in the boat." You arrived on this campus as "swabs" -- and today you will leave as proud officers of the United States Coast Guard. (Applause.) Your teachers are proud, your parents are thrilled, and your Commander-in-Chief is grateful for your devotion to duty. Congratulations to you all. (Applause.)

You didn't make it to this day on your own. Many of you had the help of a special faculty member who mentored -- mentored you along the way. Others



made it only through as a result of the intervention of one man: Hopley Yeaton -- he's the patron saint of the Square Root Club. For the moms and dads, the Square Root Club is an association of students whose GPA is so low that when you take its square root, it grows larger. (Laughter.) Unfortunately, they didn't have that club where I went to college -- (laughter) -- perhaps you'll make me an honorary member. (Laughter.)

Whether you're graduating today at the top of your class, or by the skin of your teeth, your presence on this field is a tremendous accomplishment. And it would not have been possible without the support of the families who believed in you and encouraged you. So I ask all the parents and loved ones here today to stand and be recognized by the class of 2007. (Applause.)

The degree you've earned will command respect wherever you go, and you will carry the lessons you learned here for the rest of your lives. This Academy has tested your minds, your bodies, and your character, and having passed these trials, you now embark on a voyage as officers in the oldest continuous Maritime service.

The history of the Coast Guard dates back more than two centuries, to the Revenue Cutter Service, established under the presidency of George Washington -- or as I call him, the first George W. (Laughter and applause.) Since its inception, the Coast Guard has conducted search and rescue missions, enforced our maritime laws, protected our marine environment, come to the aid of stranded boaters, and helped staunch the flow of illegal drugs and illegal migrants to our shores. And in this new century, the Coast Guard continues to carry out these vital missions.



Americans rely on the Coast Guard in times of disaster. When Hurricane Katrina hit our nation's Gulf Coast, the men and women of the Coast Guard swung into action, hanging from helicopters, pulling people off rooftops and out of trees, and rescuing more than 33,000 people. (Applause.) When storms and floods and tragedy strike, Americans know that they can count on the United States Coast Guard. (Applause.)

Americans relied on the Coast Guard on September the 11th, 2001. After terrorists struck the Twin Towers, the Coast Guard station on Staten Island put out a call for "all available boats," and organized a massive flotilla of military and civilian craft that evacuated hundreds of thousands of people from lower Manhattan. It was the largest waterborne evacuation in our nation's history. And in the days that followed, the men and women of the Coast Guard stayed on the job, assisting operations at Ground Zero, sending chaplains to comfort the bereaved, and coordinating a round-the-clock defense of New York Harbor and other vital ports. In a time of crisis, the Coast Guard did its job, and did it well. (Applause.)

On September the 11th, the home front you protect became a battlefield in a new and unprecedented war. That day, our nation changed forever, and so did the mission of the United States Coast Guard. This service assumed new and essential responsibilities: to defend our nation against terrorist infiltration, and to help stop new attacks before they kill our people.

As part of Operation Noble Eagle, the men and women of the Coast Guard are protecting more than 360 ports and more than 95,000 miles of coastline. Overseas, the Coast Guard is conducting maritime intercept operations in the Persian Gulf, patrolling the waters off Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The men and women of the Coast Guard are serving with courage, and the American people are grateful to live behind your Shield of Freedom.

Soon you'll join your fellow Coasties in carrying out these and other missions. And this Academy has prepared you well for the new challenges you will face in this war on terror. During your time here, you've taken courses in terrorist tactics and counterterrorism strategies; you've studied radiation detection, remote sensing, and the handling of hazardous materials; you participated in military exercises that have prepared you for the threats



of this new century.

You'll need all this training to help keep your fellow citizens safe. In this war, we face a brutal enemy that has already killed thousands in our midst, and is determined to bring even greater destruction to our shores. We're blessed that there has not been another terrorist attack on our homeland in the past five-and-a-half years. This is not for lack of effort on the part of the enemy. Since 9/11, al Qaeda and its allies have succeeded in carrying out horrific attacks across the world; al Qaeda leaders have repeatedly made clear they intend to strike our country again.

In January of last year, Osama bin Laden warned the American people: "Operations are under preparation and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished." Seven months later, British authorities broke up the most ambitious known al Qaeda threat to the homeland since the 9/11 attacks: a plot to blow up passenger airplanes flying to America. Our intelligence community believes that this plot was just two or three weeks away from execution. If it had been carried out, it could have rivaled 9/11 in death and destruction.

This was not the first al Qaeda plot that has been foiled since 9/11. In December 2001 we captured an al Qaeda operative named Ali Salih al-Mari. Our intelligence community believes that Ali Salih was training in poisons at an al Qaeda camp in Afghanistan, and had been sent to the United States before September the 11th to serve as a sleeper agent ready for follow-on attacks. He was ordered to our country by 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, who is now in U.S. custody. Our intelligence community believes that KSM brought Ali Salih to meet Osama bin Laden, where he pledged his loyalty to the al Qaeda leader and offered himself up as a martyr. Among the potential targets our intelligence community believes this al Qaeda operative discussed with KSM were water reservoirs, the New York Stock Exchange, and United States military academies such as this one.

We also broke up two other post-9/11 aviation plots. The first, in 2002, was a plot by Khalid Sheikh Mohammad to repeat the destruction of 9/11 by sending operatives to hijack an airplane and fly into the tallest building on the West Coast. During a hearing at Guantanamo Bay just two months ago, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad stated that the intended target was the Library Tower in Los Angeles. And in 2003, we uncovered and stopped a plot led by another suspected senior al Qaeda operative named Abu Bakr al-Azdi. Our intelligence community believes this plot was to be another East Coast aviation attack, including multiple airplanes that had been hijacked and then crashing into targets in the United States.

There is a reason that these and other plots have thus far not succeeded: Since September the 11th, we have taken bold action at home and abroad to keep our people safe.

To help stop new attacks on our country, we have undertaken the most sweeping reorganization of the federal government since the start of the Cold War. We created the new Department of Homeland Security, merging 22 different government organizations, including the Coast Guard, into a single Department with a clear mission: to protect America from future attacks.

To stop new attacks on our country, we've strengthened our nation's intelligence community. We created the position of the Director of National Intelligence to ensure our intelligence agencies operate as a single, unified enterprise. We created the National Counter Terrorism Center, where the FBI, the CIA, and other agencies work side by side to track terrorist threats across the world. We directed the National Security Agency to monitor international terrorist communications. We established a program run by the CIA to detain and question key terrorist leaders and operatives. These measures are vital. These measures are working. And these measures have helped prevent an attack on our homeland. (Applause.)

To help stop new attacks on our country, we passed the Patriot Act, breaking down the walls that had prevented federal law enforcement and intelligence



communities from sharing information about potential terrorist activities. We've transformed the FBI into an agency whose primary focus is stopping terrorist attacks. We've expanded the number of FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces from 35 before 9/11 to more than a hundred today. And we saw their effectiveness recently when one of these teams helped disrupt a plot by a group of al Qaeda-inspired extremists to kill American soldiers at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

To help stop new attacks on our country, we launched the BioWatch program, placing state-of-the-art equipment in major U.S. cities to detect biological agents. To help prevent terrorists from bringing nuclear or radiological weapons into our country, we're placing radiation detectors in all major U.S. ports. We placed advanced screening equipment and U.S. Homeland Security personnel at foreign ports, so we can pre-screen cargo headed for America. We're determined to stop the world's most dangerous men from striking America with the world's most dangerous weapons. And the Coast Guard is on the front line of this battle. (Applause.)

To help stop new attacks on our country, we've strengthened international cooperation in the fight against terror. A coalition of more than 90 nations -- nearly one-half of the world -- is working together to dry up terrorist financing and bring terrorist leaders to justice. We launched the Proliferation Security Initiative, a vast coalition of nations that are working to stop shipments of weapons of mass destruction on land, at sea, and in the air. With our allies, we have uncovered and shut down the A.Q. Khan network, which had supplied nuclear-related equipment and plans to terrorist states, including Iran and North Korea. With Great Britain, we convinced the leader of Libya to abandon his country's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. The key components of Libya's nuclear program are now locked up in a storage facility right here in the United States. And today the world is safer because Libya is out of the nuclear weapons business. (Applause.)

All these steps are making our country safer, but we're not yet safe. To strike our country, the terrorists only have to be right once; to protect our country, we have to be right 100 percent of the time. That means the best way to protect our people is to take the fight to the enemy. So after 9/11, I vowed to America that we would go on the offense against the terrorists, fighting them across the world so we do not have to face them here at home. And since 9/11, that is precisely what that United States of America has done. (Applause.)

In Afghanistan, we removed a regime that gave sanctuary and support to al Qaeda as they planned the 9/11 attacks. Today, because we acted, the terrorist camps in Afghanistan have been shut down, 25 million people have been liberated, and the Afghan people have an elected government that is fighting terrorists, instead of harboring them. (Applause.)

The Taliban and al Qaeda are seeking to roll back Afghanistan's democratic progress -- but forces from 40 nations, including every member of NATO, are helping the Afghan people defend their democratic gains. Earlier this month, Afghan, American, and NATO forces tracked down and killed a top Taliban commander in Afghanistan. His death has sent a clear message to all who would challenge Afghanistan's young democracy: We drove al Qaeda and the Taliban out of power, and they're not going to be allowed to return to power. (Applause.)

In Iraq, we removed a cruel dictator who harbored terrorists, paid the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, invaded his neighbors, defied the United Nations Security Council, pursued and used weapons of mass destruction. Iraq, the United States and the world are better off without Saddam Hussein in power. (Applause.) And today the Iraqi people are building a young democracy on the rubble of Saddam Hussein's tyranny. In



December 2005, nearly 12 million Iraqis demonstrated their desire to be free, going to the polls and choosing a new government under the most progressive, democratic constitution in the Arab world.

In 2006, a thinking enemy responded to this progress and struck back with brutality. They staged sensational attacks that led to a tragic escalation of sectarian rage and reprisal. If the sectarian violence continued to spiral out of control, the Iraqi government would have been in danger of collapse. The ensuing chaos would embolden Iran, which is fueling the violence, and al Qaeda, a key driver of Iraq's sectarian conflict. The chaos could eventually spread across the Middle East, and generations of Americans would be in even greater danger.

So I had a choice to make: withdraw our troops, or send reinforcements to help the Iraqis quell the sectarian violence. I decided to send more troops with a new mission: to help the Iraqi government secure their population and get control of Baghdad. As we carry out the new strategy, the Iraqi government has a lot of work to do. They must meet its responsibility to the Iraqi people and achieve benchmarks it has set, including adoption of a national oil law, preparations for provincial elections, progress on a new de-Baathification policy, and a review of the Iraqi constitution. The Iraqi people must see that their government is taking action to bring their country together and give all of Iraq's a stake in a peaceful future.

Now, in 2007, we are at a pivotal moment in this battle. There are many destructive forces in Iraq trying to stop this strategy from succeeding -- the most destructive is al Qaeda. Al Qaeda knows that a democratic Iraq is a threat to their ambitions to impose their hateful ideology across the Middle East. And al Qaeda knows that our presence in Iraq is a direct threat to their existence in Iraq. Our security depends on helping the Iraqis succeed and defeating Iraq -- al Qaeda in Iraq. (Applause.)

Some in our country question whether the battle in Iraq is part of the war on terror. Among the terrorists, there's no doubt. Hear the words of Osama bin Laden: He calls the struggle in Iraq a "war of destiny." He proclaimed "the war is for you or for us to win. If we win it, it means your defeat and disgrace forever."

Bin Laden is matching his words with action. He attempted to send a new commander to Iraq, an Iraqi-born terrorist named Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi. According to our intelligence community, this terrorist had been a senior advisor to bin Laden, he served as his top commander in Afghanistan, he was responsible for all al Qaeda's military operations against our coalition in that country. Abd al-Hadi never made it to Iraq. He was captured last year, and he was recently he was transferred to the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay.

There is a reason that bin Laden sent one of his most experienced paramilitary leaders to Iraq: He believes that if al Qaeda can drive us out, they can establish Iraq as a new terrorist sanctuary. Our intelligence community believes that, "al Qaeda leaders see victory in Iraq -- the heart of the caliphate and currently the most active front in their war -- as a religious and strategic imperative." If al Qaeda succeeds in Iraq, they would pursue their stated goals of turning that nation into a base from which to overthrow moderate governments in the region, impose their hateful ideology on millions, and launch new attacks on America and other nations. Victory in Iraq is important for Osama bin Laden -- and victory in Iraq is vital for the United States of America. (Applause.)

I've often warned that if we fail in Iraq, the enemy will follow us home. Many ask: How do you know? Today, I'd like to share some information with you that attests to al Qaeda's intentions. According to our intelligence community, in January 2005, Osama bin Laden tasked the terrorist Zarqawi -- who was then al Qaeda's top leader in Iraq -- with forming a cell to conduct terrorist attacks outside of Iraq. Bin Laden emphasized that America should be Zarqawi's number one priority in terms of foreign attacks. Zarqawi welcomed this direction; he claimed that he had already come up with some good proposals.



To help Zarqawi in these efforts, our intelligence community reports that bin Laden then tasked one of his top terrorist operatives, Hamza Rabia, to send Zarqawi a briefing on al Qaeda's external operations, including information about operations against the American homeland. Our intelligence community reports that a senior al Qaeda leader, Abu Faraj al-Libi, went further and suggested that bin Laden actually send Rabia, himself, to Iraq to help plan external operations. Abu Faraj later speculated that if this effort proved successful, al Qaeda might one day prepare the majority of its external operations from Iraq.

In May of 2005, Abu Faraj was captured and taken into CIA custody. Several months later, in December 2005, Rabia was killed in Pakistan. Several months after that, in June of 2006, the terrorist Zarqawi was killed by American forces in Iraq. Successes like these are blows to al Qaeda. They're a testament to steps we have taken to strengthen our intelligence, work closely with partners overseas, and keep the pressure on the enemy by staying on the offense. (Applause.)

Despite our pressure, despite the setbacks that al Qaeda has suffered, it remains extremely dangerous. As we've surged our forces in Iraq, al Qaeda has responded with a surge of its own. The terrorists' goal in Iraq is to reignite sectarian violence and break support for the war here at home. And they believe they're succeeding. A few weeks ago, al Qaeda's number two, second in command, Zawahiri, issued a video in which he gloated that al Qaeda's "movement of violence" has "forced the Americans to accept a pullout -- about which they only differ in regard to its timing." We can expect al Qaeda to continue its campaign of high profile attacks, including deadly suicide bombings and assassinations. And as they do, our troops will face more fighting and increased risks in the weeks and months ahead.

The fight in Iraq is tough, but my point today to you is the fight is essential to our security -- al Qaeda's leaders inside and outside of Iraq have not given up on their objective of attacking America again. Now, many critics compare the battle in Iraq to the situation we faced in Vietnam. There are many differences between the two conflicts, but one stands out above all: The enemy in Vietnam had neither the intent nor the capability to strike our homeland. The enemy in Iraq does. Nine-eleven taught us that to protect the American people, we must fight the terrorists where they live so that we don't have to fight them where we live. (Applause.)

The question for our elected leaders is: Do we comprehend the danger of an al Qaeda victory in Iraq, and will we do what it takes to stop them? However difficult the fight in Iraq has become, we must win it. Al Qaeda is public enemy number one for Iraq's young democracy, and al Qaeda is public enemy number one for America, as well. And that is why we must support our troops, we must support the Iraqi government, and we must defeat al Qaeda in Iraq. (Applause.)

We're thankful to the military, the intelligence, and law enforcement personnel who work tirelessly to stop new attacks on our country. With every plot they foil, every terrorist they capture, we learn more about the enemy's plans and persistence. In the minds of al Qaeda leaders, 9/11 was just a down-payment on violence yet to come. It's tempting to believe that the calm here at home after September the 11th means that the danger to our country has passed. I see the intelligence every day. The danger has not passed. Here in America, we're living in the eye of a storm. All around us, dangerous winds are swirling, and these winds could reach our shores at any moment.

The men and women of the Coast Guard know how to navigate the storm. We're counting on you to help America weather the challenges that lie ahead. As you begin your Coast Guard careers, you can approach the future with confidence, because our nation has faced dangerous enemies before, and emerged victorious every time. Terrorists can try to kill the innocent, but they cannot kill the desire for liberty that burns in the hearts of millions across the earth. The power of freedom defeated the ideologies of fascism and communism in the last century, and freedom will defeat the hateful ideologies of the terrorists in this century.

Victory in this struggle will require valor and determination and persistence, and these qualities can be found in abundance in the Class of 2007. (Applause.)

Your class has chosen a motto: Let Courage Part the Seas. America will be counting on your courage in the years to come. You will take your oath as Coast Guard officers in a time of war, knowing all the risks your service entails. I thank each of you for your bold decision to wear the uniform. My call to you is this: Trust in the power of freedom to overcome tyranny and terror; show leadership in freedom's defense, and character in all you do; be ready for anything. The Coasties who came before you never thought they would be organizing a flotilla in New York Harbor, or patrolling distant coasts in the Persian Gulf. Like them, you will serve in ways you cannot imagine today. But if you bring the skills and creativity you learned at this Academy to every task, our nation's security will be in good hands. (Applause.)

You leave this Academy "strong in resolve to be worthy of the traditions of commissioned officers in the United States Coast Guard."

I respect your passion for service, and the courage of your choice. Your country is grateful, and proud of each of you. Congratulations. God bless. Semper Paratus. (Applause.)

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