

JFK's Air Force

On a crisp June day in 1963, John F. Kennedy became the first president to speak at an Air Force Academy commencement. He was awarded an honorary degree, putting him in the Class of '63. JFK spoke at a time of great tension between his administration and USAF, personified by Gen. Curtis LeMay, Chief of Staff (who was in attendance). The two clashed often—over nuclear arms, Cuba, the B-70 bomber, and more. One of JFK's top advisors called LeMay "my least favorite human being." In his speech, Kennedy talked of his plan for a new civilian aviation program and goes to some length to assure graduates that he saw a bright future for the manned aircraft and an "expanding role" for the Air Force. It was, one might say, the extension of an olive branch.

You will have an opportunity ... for a service career more varied and demanding than any that has been opened to any officer corps in the history of any country.

There are some who might be skeptical of that assertion. They claim that the future of the Air Force is mortgaged to an obsolete weapons system, the manned aircraft, or that Air Force officers of the future will be nothing more than "silent silo sitters," but nothing could be further from the truth.

It is the very onrush of technology which demands an expanding role for the nation's Air Force and Air Force officers, and which guarantees that an Air Force career in the next 40 years will be even more changing and more challenging than the careers of the last 40 years.

Some of you will travel where no man has ever traveled before. Some of you will fly the fastest planes that have ever been built, reach the highest altitudes that man has ever gone to, and lift the heaviest payloads of any aviator in history. Some of you will hold in your hands the most awesome destructive power which any nation or any man has conceived.

Some of you will work with the leaders of new nations which were not even nations a few years ago. Some of you will support guerrilla and counterguerrilla operations that combine the newest techniques of warfare with the oldest techniques of the jungle, and some of you will help develop new planes that spread their wings in flight, detect other planes at an unheard of distance, deliver new weapons with unprecedented accuracy, and survey

"Commencement"

**President John F. Kennedy Remarks at
US Air Force Academy
Colorado Springs, Colo.
June 5, 1963**

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the ground from incredible heights as a testament to our strong faith in the future of airpower and the manned airplane.

Today the challenging new frontier in commercial aviation and in military aviation is a frontier already crossed by the military: supersonic flight. ... [It] is my judgment that this government should immediately commence a new program in partnership with private industry to develop at the earliest practical date the prototype of a commercially successful supersonic transport superior to that being built in any other country of the world. ...

Congress and the country should be prepared to invest the funds and effort necessary to maintain this nation's lead in long-range aircraft, a lead we have held since the end of the Second World War, a lead we should make every responsible effort to maintain. ... This commitment, I believe, is essential to a strong and forward-looking nation, and indicates the future of the manned aircraft as we move into a missile age as well.

The fact that the greatest value of all of the weapons of massive retaliation lies in their ability to deter war does not diminish their importance, nor will national security in the years ahead be achieved simply by piling up bigger bombs or burying our missiles under bigger loads of concrete. For in an imperfect world where human folly has been the rule and not the exception, the surest way to bring on the war that can never happen is to sit back and assure ourselves it will not happen.

The existence of mutual nuclear deterrence cannot be shrugged off as stalemate, for our national security in a period of rapid change will depend on constant reappraisal of our present doctrines, on alertness to new developments, on imagination and resourcefulness, and new ideas. Stalemate is a static term and not one of you would be here today if you believed you were entering an outmoded service requiring only custodial duties in a period of nuclear stalemate....

In the last 18 years, [the United States] has carried the burden for free people everywhere. I think that this is a burden which we accept willingly, recognizing that if this country does not accept it, no people will, recognizing that in the most difficult time in the whole life of freedom, the United States is called upon to play its greatest role. ✪

Cadets at the US Air Force Academy salute President John Kennedy and Maj. Gen. Robert Warren, the academy superintendent.

Photo by Robert L. Knudsen

