From the Chairman

I recently spoke at the graduation for the West Point Class of 2011, and while my remarks were mostly directed to the next generation of Army leadership, there is a broader message for all of us. What follows is the crux of those remarks:

Over the last 4 years, one of the greatest privileges of this position has been getting to know the men and women of the United States Army. Days like today remind us why our Army has played such a singular and essential role in our nation’s history. In many ways, the story of the United States Army is the story of America—from our founding through the Civil War, a tumultuous 20th century, and right up until today.

I was thinking about a figure so prominent in that story, someone with whom I can in many ways relate: George Armstrong Custer. His story as a Cadet isn’t too far from my own as a Midshipman, and, no, Custer and I did not know each other personally. I went to school in the ‘60s, but not the 1860s.

Just as my performance at that “other” Academy was, shall we say, less than ideal, Custer’s record at West Point left something to be desired as well. A review of conduct records at the time—and they do keep track of those things—suggests he had marginal study habits and a proclivity for petty offenses, scoring demerits for “being late to formation,” “hair out of regs,” and my personal favorite, “throwing snowballs,” for which he logged three demerits.

I have to admit, I beat Custer in this department, having racked up 115 demerits in a single day during my last year. What happened back then remains highly classified, but let’s just say that my offense was a little bit more serious than throwing snowballs. So, yes, I have “walked the Area” a few times. There were times when I owned the Area. I could have built condos.

Custer graduated last in his class, known as “the goat,” which I note is the same name as Navy’s mascot. I also finished near the bottom. I just hope our stories end differently.

If my record in school said anything, it was, “Mullen, you are really going to have to work hard in the Navy”—and I did, and the opportunities this life of service has provided far exceeded anything I ever expected. I’ve quite simply had the chance to work with some of the best people in the world, gaining friends and mentors who have supported and enriched me.

Indeed, none of us get to where we are on our own. There’s always someone who helped make it happen. So you ought to remember those who got you here: your moms, dads, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other family members.

Families, thank you for raising these fine women and men in small towns and large cities all over this country, indeed, all over the world. You instilled in your kids a desire to serve, a willingness to sacrifice and to suffer—and I’m not just talking about mechanical engineering class.

Four years ago, you drove them through the Stony Lonesome Gate, and you handed them over. You said, “Here, take my child in this time of war, teach them how to lead and
It was a brave thing you did, and difficult. But it was probably more difficult driving away. As the parents of two Naval Academy graduates, my wife, Deborah, and I know that feeling all too well—the pride, the fear, the incredible elation of returning home and knowing you won’t have to pick up dirty socks off the bathroom floor anymore or scrape pizza cheese off the inside of the microwave or jump in the family car only to find the gas on “E.”

Today, of course, is really all about the Class of 2011. When this country was attacked on 9/11, most of you were just 11 or 12 years old, getting your braces off and getting yelled at for leaving dirty socks on the bathroom floor.

We have been at war nearly half your young lives. Yet all of you made a choice freely to serve your country, to come here to West Point. Your choice, your commitment, speaks well not only of your character, but also of your courage. For that, I deeply respect and thank each of you.

Today, you become a commissioned officer in the ranks of the most respected military on Earth, the vast majority of you heading into the Army, the very center of gravity of our force.

It’s an Army tempered by 10 years of combat, an expeditionary force that has literally rewritten just about every rule and every scrap of doctrine it follows to adapt to the reality it now faces.

It’s an Army not much bigger than it was on September 11 that is now organized around Brigade Combat Teams instead of divisions, that deploys more modular and more flexible capabilities than ever before, that can kill the enemy swiftly and silently one day and then help build a school or dig a well the next.

It’s an Army that understands the power of ballots as well as bullets and culture as well as conflict, an Army that has surged...
to the fore of our national consciousness, not by being a bulwark but rather by being an agent of change.

It’s an Army of flesh and blood, an Army of young men and women like yourselves who signed up willingly to face danger and to risk their lives for something greater than those lives.

Your job is to lead them and lead them well. That is what they expect of you. Actually, it isn’t a job at all; it’s a duty. For those of you who have no prior service, you are going to be awestruck at the manner in which these young Soldiers do their duty every single day.

A couple of years ago, I visited a unit high atop a hill in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan. You stand up there and you look at the utter desolation of the place and the spartan conditions these young people are living in and you cannot help but get a little thick in the throat.

I awarded the Silver Star to a young officer at that outpost, Captain Greg Ambrosia, Class of 2005. He earned that medal for actions the year prior when he was a first lieutenant, just 2 years after graduating from West Point.

Leading his Soldiers in a nighttime air assault into enemy territory, Lieutenant Ambrosia established key high ground observation posts. By morning, they encountered an enemy force that not only outnumbered them, but also surrounded their position, closing into within hand grenade range. Greg fiercely led his Soldiers to safety, placing himself in the line of fire. Under his lead, they repelled the opposing force long enough for support to arrive, denying the enemy key terrain.

When asked what inspired him to lead like that, he looked down at his boots and said simply, “My Soldiers.”

I spent more time with the Army in my two terms as Chairman than I have any other Service, and I know what he means.

Those troops had been out there 14 months. They had seen a lot of tough fighting and lost a lot of good Soldiers, good buddies. They knew they were going home soon, but they wanted to point out to me all the places nearby where they could venture because they had learned about the culture and had figured out how to work with the tribal leaders.

When they yelled “hoohah” after the ceremony, it wasn’t because they were proud of their new medals. It was because they were proud of the difference they knew they were making together as a team. It’s that team that has made possible the success we’ve seen in Iraq, the progress we are now making in Afghanistan, the support we are providing over the skies of Libya, and the security we ensure around the globe.

You’re going to be a member of that team. You’re going to be expected to support and to have courage and to lead that team almost from day one, and that is a tall order, hard enough all by itself.

But today I’m going to give you another assignment. I’m going to ask you to take on yet another duty, an obligation far more complex and yet just as important as small-unit leadership. I’m going to ask you to be a Statesman as well as a Soldier. I’m going to ask you to remember that you are citizens first and foremost.

This great republic of ours was founded on simple ideas—simple but enduring. One of these is that the people, through their elected representatives, will, as the Constitution stipulates, raise an army and maintain a navy.

The people will determine the course that the military steers, the skills we perfect, the wars we fight. The people reign supreme. We answer to them.

We are therefore—and must remain—a neutral instrument of the state, accountable to our civilian leaders, no matter which political party holds sway.

But we can never forget that we, too, are the people. We, too, are voters and little league coaches and scout leaders and crossing guards—or at least we should be. We, too, have an obligation to preserve the very institutions that preserve us as a fighting force.

As George Washington so eloquently put it, “When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen.”

So it is not enough today that we deploy. It is not enough today that we fight. It is not enough today that we serve, unless we serve also the greater cause of American self-government and everything that underpins it.

Self-government is not some sweet dish upon which a people may indulge themselves. It requires work and effort, sacrifice and strain. It may at times leave a bitter taste, and because it does, self-government burdens us equally with obligation, as well as privilege.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I do not underestimate the importance of military service, and I am not suggesting that one who serves in uniform has not wholly or without honor rendered the Nation its due. Quite the contrary. I have been to the field hospitals. I have been to Dover. I’ve seen good men and women laid to rest at
Today's operating environment is a dynamic landscape that grows more interconnected and interdependent every day. Yet we still struggle to make the most basic of connections, the relationships that matter so much. As you go from here, please seek also to go beyond the technical knowledge you've gained and broaden your views. Try to see things through others' eyes and leverage every opportunity to better understand and to be better understood.

Know that our trust and confidence go with you. The American people go with you. We are grateful for who you are and all that you will do for the Army, and shoulder-to-shoulder with your fellow citizens, for the Nation and for the world.

Thank you for your service. May God bless each and every one of you and your families, and may God bless America.

MICHAEL G. MULLEN
Admiral, U.S. Navy
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Chairman arrives at Forward Operating Base Jackson, Afghanistan, April 2011