Good morning everybody. I'd like to start by thanking Mr. Brennan and the RL faculty for inviting me to participate in this commemoration today. It's a pleasure to be back in Rousmaniere Hall although it's a bit strange to be up on this stage. I'm especially pleased to be here today to help the school celebrate the men and women who have served this country in our armed forces.

There are probably one or two of you in each class who are seriously considering joining the military. To you I say, I couldn't recommend it highly enough. You'll learn things about yourself and leadership and honor and grit and teamwork that you likely wouldn't discover anywhere else. You'll also learn plenty about incompetence and bureaucracy and pointless suffering and tedium and at times you'll curse the movies that fooled you into thinking military life was full of excitement and adventure. But if your experience is anything like mine it will be the greatest privilege of your life and when your time in the military's up you won't regret a single day of it. If you're one of those boys, I'd encourage you to come find me after hall today so we can talk more about navigating the enlistment process and preparing for military life.

But that leaves roughly 300 boys who will never wear camouflage professionally and RL's powers-that-be must think there's something valuable for you to learn from military service as well, or else they wouldn't have invited an otherwise undistinguished alumnus to come talk with you all this morning. And it's primarily to you I want to speak today, particularly you older boys because, first, if we're being honest, none of you sixies are going to remember a word of this speech six years from now, and second, those of you nearing graduation are going to have to make some decisions in the next few years about how to construct meaningful lives and those decisions will have profound consequences for you and those around you.

So, what is it about military service that merits our collective consideration today? Certainly, it has something to do with courage and selflessness, which in the military context are closely related. Courage is simply a particular type of selflessness, one that involves loving something or someone more than your own safety or comfort. There are many varieties of courage, some of which we encounter every day, but the courage required to face the fear of death is particular to the military and a few other select professions. Part of why we honor soldiers, then, is that the danger inherent to combat makes selflessness explicit and unambiguous.

For a moment try to imagine fear not as an abstract concept but as a physiological state. Imagine you're in the middle of a firefight, taking cover behind a large rock or a low wall. Your heartrate is jacked to 180 beats-per-minute, your vision has narrowed to a tight tunnel, every muscle tensed, face contorted in a grimace, hearing the zip and thwack of bullets all around you. Imagine willing yourself to overcome the basic instinct of self-preservation and leave the safety of your position to return fire on the enemy or to go to the aid of a wounded comrade, simply because you have a job to do and your friends are relying on you. That victory over fear is both an extraordinary display of selflessness and the most ordinary expectation of an infantryman in combat.

It's worth mentioning upfront that I'm not talking about myself here. Time and chance conspired to make my own experience of combat relatively safe. Some of the decisions I made had life or death consequences, but it was never my life in the balance.

But over course of our nation's history countless servicemembers have been subjected to the type of knee-shaking, sphincter-tightening, life-flashing-being-your-eyes fear I just described and they have almost invariably responded with remarkable courage. On my second deployment to Afghanistan, I was responsible for coordinating intelligence support for the Ranger

Regiment's ground operations and in consequence I monitored all our raids from our task force's operations center. Night after night I witnessed incredible acts of gallantry on the video feeds the aircraft supporting these operations beamed back to our headquarters. I've seen a wall collapse from the force of a secondary explosion onto a group of Rangers preparing to assault a compound and watched their friends rush to dig them out of the rubble while bullets peppered the ground around them. I've seen Rangers barely older than you seniors take a break from a gunfight to donate blood to a wounded Sergeant awaiting medical evacuation in a vein-to-vein transfusion and then rush back into battle as soon as a new donor rotated in. These are my heroes. It was an absolute privilege to serve alongside them and I'm honored to bear witness to their courage in front of you today.

But selflessness can't provide a complete explanation for our appreciation of veterans. At its core military service involves inflicting violence on fellow human beings. I've helped coordinate drone strikes on Afghan insurgents, bad people but human beings nonetheless, and watched in real time as they bled out, sometimes surrounded by their families. Isolated from their broader context, my actions were criminal, not noble. And selflessness alone can't redeem violence. After all, the quite literal selflessness of the suicide bomber detonating himself in a crowded bazaar isn't something we should honor. Every antagonist America has faced in every conflict has shown courage and while I can hold a grudging professional respect for a Taliban commander or a Nazi S.S. officer, the indefensibility of the causes they serve distorts their valor into something indistinguishable from evil.

The fact is that the moral value of military service is inextricably linked to the cause being served. Violence is only justified in the defense of principles that, on aggregate and in the long run, promote human well-being. In the words of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, "War is

an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth a war, is worse… As long as justice and injustice have not terminated their ever renewing fight for ascendancy in the affairs of mankind, human beings must be willing, when need is, to do battle for the one against the other." We honor the military in the United States, then, both because we admire its ethos of selfless service and because we believe that the defense of American principles is a worthy object of that service.

Let's unpack that last part, because I think we're having increasing trouble defining exactly what it is about our country that is worth defending and these sorts of conversations have the potential to get very confused indeed. An example of this confusion: On another Veterans Day a few years ago, I was watching an ESPN segment in which Stephen A. Smith listed the top five reasons he loves America. I don't remember what items five through two were but the U.S. military took the top spot. While I genuinely appreciated the sentiment, I couldn't help viewing this as an example of that brand of circular logic that Stephen A. Smith specializes in. The U.S. military exists to defend America, so if the primary reason that America deserves defending is the U.S. military then we've ended up back where we started. The point is, if military service has any meaning there must be something independently and overridingly precious about America.

Let me give you my account of what I think that is. And before I dive in, I'll just note that this account is highly personal, so I don't want you to think I'm preaching to you (the preaching bit comes later). These are just my own conclusions about what made my service meaningful.

When people ask me why I joined the Army I occasionally tell the stories of my great-grandfathers. My dad's grandfather Felippo Gaziano was born into a peasant family in southern Sicily. As a boy he was so malnourished that he developed alopecia and when the rest of his

family emigrated to America, they left him behind fearing his condition would prevent him from passing the health screening required of incoming immigrants. Several years later he made it to America, arriving as a penniless and presumably very frightened teenager. Eventually he settled in a small mining town in West Virginia where he opened a grocery store and barber shop. He was deservedly proud of what he'd accomplished, but he wanted more for his children. Shortly before my grandfather finished high school Felippo asked him what his plans were after graduation. My grandfather had never considered anything other than going to work in the family store and told his father as much. "No," Felippo told him, "You're going to go to college and you're going to become a doctor." Which, dutiful son that he was, is exactly what my grandfather did. My mom's grandfather William had a similar story, running away from his family's dirt-floor home in western Ireland to catch a ship to the New World. His son, my grandfather, would join the Navy during World War II, put himself through college on the G.I. Bill, and become a successful and enormously respected engineer.

Two generations on, my experience of childhood was markedly different from that of my ancestors. I certainly had my share of social and emotional struggles, but all-in-all my youth was remarkably easy. I grew up in suburban comfort, never having to worry about my safety or nourishment, and inculcated with the belief that there were no limits to what I could achieve. When I reached high school, my parents enrolled me (despite strenuous protest, I'll add) in what is quite possibly the best secondary school on Earth. I am endlessly grateful for the people who shepherded me through that period of my life and I remain up to my eyeballs in debt to many of those in this hall: parents, siblings, friends, and teachers.

But even more than the individuals who shaped my childhood I'm grateful to the system within which it occurred. For me the principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence have

an intimate meaning because I can trace their influence on my family's history. "[T]hat all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed", for me, these aren't just words; they are a powerful incantation that transported my family from poverty to comfort.

What is it about these principles that are so special? It is simply the case that certain forms of social and political organization are more beneficial to human beings than others. This is a basic point, but it can get lost sometimes. Once while deployed to Afghanistan I got into a bizarre argument with an Air Force officer whose position was that we couldn't make any moral comparisons between the American and Taliban political systems, that each system is equally good within its particular cultural context. Consider that this was coming from someone who was participating in a violent conflict that, according to his worldview, essentially amounted to a difference of tastes, and you can see the sort of moral and intellectual trouble this type of relativism can get you into.

In my experience, people aren't intrinsically either good or bad; we're all just animals loaded with a bunch of evolutionary baggage. Nature has endowed us with a set of instincts that help us navigate the world around us. These include things like reason, self-control, and empathy, but also things like anger and greed. Each instinct has an evolutionary explanation; in the case of the squirrel hoarding nuts, his greed helps him survive the winter. But some of these capacities can lead us to harm other people, while others facilitate cooperation. The trick is to discourage our selfish instincts while fostering our altruistic ones. The example of the soldier

getting out from behind his rock in a firefight, altruism triumphing over survival itself, shows just how far this project can go.

Society and government play a huge role here. We can set up schools that socialize kids to share their toys; we can establish democratic institutions that allow us to nonviolently resolve political disagreement; we can lay down economic rules that facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation; we can create a judicial system that enforces respect for the rights of other citizens. Countries that have governments that effectively use such institutions to encourage prosocial impulses and discourage antisocial ones tend to be the best places to live. And I contend that the principles enunciated in the Declaration, enshrined in the Constitution, and manifested in our social and democratic institutions are a particularly good recipe for human happiness.

America isn't perfect, not nation is or ever will be, but the degree to which its system of government promotes the well-being of its citizens is historically and geographically rare. Without effective checks on people's worst impulses, life has been nasty, brutish, and short for most of human history. In many parts of the world it still is. It took deploying to Afghanistan for me to really appreciate, deep in my bones, how precious the American system is. There is as much natural goodwill and intelligence in your average Afghan as in your average American. But Afghanistan lacks institutions to effectively promote cooperation and control violence, and efforts to build those institutions over the last 20 years have been stymied by hubris and incompetence. The result is collective misery.

This applies more than ever since the Taliban's return to power. You may have seen the awful videos from August of Afghans dangling from a departing aircraft at Hamid Karzai Airport in a desperate attempt to escape their country. For those poor souls clinging to that C-17's wheels the distinctions between fear and security, between freedom and oppression,

between happiness and misery weren't academic. They understood in a tragically visceral way that a nation's social and political arrangements have a concrete effect on the well-being of its citizens. And these men deserved the hardship they were trying to escape no more than I deserved the comfort and ease that I've enjoyed all my life. These differences in individual fortune can be as arbitrary as the roll of a die.

However, the fact that life in America is immeasurably better than in many other parts of the world is far from accidental. The construction, maintenance, defense, and improvement of our society has been a monumental and deliberate project. You can get a glimpse of the scale of this effort if you go to a military cemetery, from Gettysburg to Normandy, each of the headstones representing decades of life unlived. But any single graveyard reveals only a small fraction of the total sacrifice. We are the beneficiaries of centuries of contributions by soldiers, and statesmen and public servants of all stripes. The point is this: our society is not a natural state of human affairs, it is an artificial ecosystem that real people worked very hard to build.

It's worth noting that this project isn't static; it's a continuous and ongoing effort. America hasn't always lived up to its own principles and the benefits of our system haven't always been distributed evenly. But we've gotten better over time because at various points in our history good people have held up a mirror to the nation and forced it to reckon with its shortcomings. If it weren't for their contributions, we wouldn't live in a country that we can be proud of today. Being grateful for everything America has given us doesn't preclude being clear-eyed about its many faults. In fact, a principled patriotism, one based on ideals and not on blood or soil or some mythical sense of national greatness, requires confronting our failings as a country.

I won't pretend that I had a fully coherent worldview as a high schooler. But I had some rudimentary version of this argument worked out by the time I graduated, the key features of which were: 1) the American system, despite its flaws, generally promotes human well-being and has also greatly benefitted me individually; 2) the American system wasn't conjured out of thin air, rather it was created and sustained by the effort and sacrifice of real people; and 3) if others don't continue to sustain and improve upon the system then the whole project will stagnate or fall apart. That's more or less why I joined the Army, it's why I think America is worth defending, and that's what I think ennobles service in our military.

I'll note that this stuff matters for soldiers. At least it did for me. It's hard to fight for something you don't think has profound meaning. And while battlefield courage is more often about the bonds of brotherhood than abstract ideas, most soldiers I know wear pride in their nation into battle like moral armor.

You might notice something circular here too, but not of the Stephen A. Smith variety, I think. My decision to join the Army was strongly motivated by the gratitude I felt to those who came before me. In truth, each generation of Americans is called to service by the sacrifices of the generations that preceded it and on and on in a continuous cycle. But we're not just spinning our wheels here, because the goals of the American project are worthy of our sacrifices.

And so I turn to you, the boys of RL. I foreshadowed some preaching earlier and here it is: The fact that you're sitting in this hall right now means that you, like me, have benefited enormously from the American system. I won't pretend to know each of your individual backgrounds but by attending this school you have been given a rare opportunity. In reminding you of this good fortune I certainly don't mean to convey a sense of guilt. You didn't choose to be born where you are and many of the benefits you've accrued you earned through hard work

and passion and diligence. You don't need to apologize to anyone, now or ever, for your success. But you should feel grateful for it. And if you acknowledge the debt of gratitude you owe for the opportunities you've been given, I hope you'll also acknowledge your responsibility to pay it forward. We are all entangled in a vast web of mutual obligation and, mixing metaphors here just to make Mr. Cervas squirm a little, if you fail to reciprocate the sacrifices made on your behalf you'll be defaulting on a moral debt to society.

I'm certainly not encouraging you all to join the military. We're here today to celebrate veterans but there are countless occupations that are inherently service-oriented: teaching, medicine, diplomacy, firefighting, policing, activism, entrepreneurship, and even, believe it or not, politics. In fact, selflessness in the service of a worthy cause comes in an infinite variety of forms. Any job that you approach with the intention of adding value to society is a form of service.

In the next couple of years, you seniors will make a series of decisions that will set you on a path you'll follow for the rest of your lives. When it comes time to declare a major, I'm guessing most of you will choose finance or economics. Which is absolutely fine; I want to live in a country with functioning banks and efficient markets and businesses that generate wealth and jobs and innovative products. Business and finance are entirely compatible with service. But don't chose that path by default, in other words don't let that path choose you. Instead, I'd encourage you to ask yourself the question posed by architect Buckminster Fuller, "What is it on this planet that needs doing that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it?" Regardless of your answer to that question, simply asking it now will help you approach whatever career you choose with a greater sense of purpose. So, as you start to map out your post-secondary lives, I'd encourage you to take inventory of your passions and

talents and consider how you can best apply them to help others, not only for the country's sake but for your own.

Because here's the secret paradox at the heart of selfless service: it's also in your own self-interest. It turns out that service is immensely rewarding, and gratitude is an antidote to unhappiness. Our intuitions on this point are often misleading but it's true. Modern psychology and ancient wisdom agree that if you want to be happy look after those around you; if you want to be miserable think only of your own interests. Since I left the Army, I've missed the intoxicating sense of purpose that infuses military life. It's harder now to go to bed content with what I accomplished in a given day and harder to pull myself out of my neuroses and insecurities. Satisfaction with adult life is very much bound up in how you construct meaning out of it. So, I say again, if you want to be happy, find some way to serve.

I imagine exhorting you all to service is somewhat unnecessary. After all you go to a school where, "From those to whom much has been given much will be expected". But then again, the whole point of holidays is to periodically remind ourselves of the obvious. And I think it's particularly important on this holiday to remind ourselves of the value of service and the preciousness of our American system because pessimism has become very easy to come by these days.

One of the low points of my military career occurred on January 6th of this year, when I watched the Capitol riot from an operations center in Jordan. I came back from dinner that night to see the protest projected on one of our headquarters' big screen TVs. I spent that night wondering whether the nation I had traveled halfway around the world to defend had given up on the democratic ideals that had made it worth defending.

Of course, our nation is strong and resilient, and the reports of America's demise are often greatly exaggerated, but our current political dysfunction and partisan extremism are real cause for concern. So, I want to leave you with one last piece of advice: learn to question your own assumptions. When we find a cause we're passionate about, one we're convinced will make the world a better place, it's easy to get carried away by self-righteous zeal. I suspect I've been guilty of this today. But few things in life are black and white and few choices are between good and bad. More frequently decisions come down to good and marginally better or bad and marginally worse. There are nearly always tradeoffs to be considered and there often isn't sufficient information to make accurate comparisons. All of this means it's easy to make mistakes.

You likely already have some sense of life's complexity and ambiguity. And some of you may be holding out hope for a time when you're older and wiser and everything starts to become a little clearer. I have bad news for you: if you're anything like me, 10 years from now, you won't feel that you have a better grasp on life than you do today. You'll have learned much about the world but your awareness of how much you don't know will have expanded proportionally.

So what to do? Embracing certainty leads to extremism and embracing uncertainty leads to paralysis. The only solution is to steer a middle course, acting in the face of uncertainty while acknowledging that your decisions very well may be wrong. This takes real intellectual courage, but it's essential. And if you accept your own potential for good faith mistakes you can recognize that tendency in others too. Because the adage "never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity" is one of the most vital lessons you can learn. I can tell you from

experience that there are very few people who are genuinely malicious, but we are all frequently and persistently wrong.

The author David Foster Wallace once described what he called the Democratic Spirit. "A Democratic Spirit" he said "is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a very difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain; particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a [Democratic Spirit's] criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity - you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually."

I think we as a nation are starting to lose the collective habit of engaging with each other in a Democratic Spirit. America's public sphere is in danger of becoming dominated by partisan extremists, convinced of the absolute truth of their beliefs, screaming at each other over the heads of a paralyzed center. Preserving American greatness is going to require us to relearn how to approach difficult issues with a Democratic Spirit. You may be thinking that I've strayed from the theme of military service, but this is pertinent, because if you genuinely want to honor our nation's servicemembers it will be your job to ensure that America remains a nation they can be proud to defend.

I don't want to end on a dark note and truth is being back in this school and seeing a new crop of RL boys eager to take on the world gives me a lot of hope. As you continue to pursue your studies at this great school be mindful of all you have to be thankful for, particularly, on this day, the sacrifices of those whose selflessness underwrites your safety. And know that when you leave this place there is important work for you to do. I'm confident you will be up for whatever task you choose to tackle. And for that I want to thank you in advance for your service.