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Addresses

Giving the nation the best we have

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Something primal in war connects with the good and evil in each of us. War is tragic. It's brutish. It's a sin against our brothers, against God and against our own human dignity.

Yet war, for all its hideousness and suffering, also demands things that are noble: skill, discipline and self-sacrifice. Homer hated war fiercely in *The Iliad*, -- but it's very curious that he wrote about the greatness and heroism of warriors with such genius. William Butler Yeats had the same divided feelings when he described the bloody 1916 Irish uprising as "a terrible beauty." And of course, Robert E. Lee said that, "It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it." For Christians who understand the consequences of sin, none of this is surprising. Violence seems hardwired into the human experience. It began with our turning away from God in Genesis.

We live with a permanent dilemma. We have the duty to pray for peace, and to work earnestly for peace, and to mean it when we say "war never again." But we also instinctively know that as long as men and women are sinners, as long as God and Satan struggle for the soul of the world, wars will take place. Aristotle will too often be right when he says, "We make war that we may live in peace."

Peace is not simply the absence of war. Peace is the presence of justice. The irony of human affairs is that sometimes evil is so pressing and so destructive that the innocent can't be defended except through the cost of blood and lives. And that brings us to our conversation tonight. Virtuous military leaders are vital in defending a free people because securing the peace and the conduct of war are morally loaded enterprises. This is also why the military profession is not simply necessary or useful, but honorable. It's why your vocation as future military officers matters. It's why your lives matter -- to serve God by serving other people in the vocation He calls you to.

I want to offer just a few thoughts tonight. Then we'll open things up for discussion, because the questions I get are usually more interesting than anything in my prepared remarks. So here's my first point: We can't give what we don't have. An obvious example is leadership. We can't lead other people until we learn how to do it by experiencing leadership, both good and sometimes not so good, from others.

Before I was a bishop, I was a member of the Capuchin Franciscans. Religious orders like my own can only achieve their mission within the Church if the members first learn obedience, humility, discipline and self-mastery. These are the building blocks of an order's effectiveness. When the members lose those qualities, the community begins to unravel. Leadership in religious life is very explicitly a form of service, not power -- and the best leaders never forget what they learned about leadership by first subjecting themselves to the leadership of others.

Obviously the Air Force and the Capuchins have very different purposes. In some ways they're very different organisms. But they both depend on proper obedience to authority, the habit of self-mastery and a commitment to a mission larger than the selfishness of their individual members. As hard as your academy training may be during your four years here, it does teach you the basic law of human maturity: Nobody really grows up until he's tested. Nobody really understands the circumstances and suffering of another person until she's lived those circumstances and that suffering herself. Too much of our country no longer believes that obedience has any role in helping people become mature and free; or that self-sacrifice is the only path to self-mastery. And I think we're weaker because of it.

Here's my second point. We serve Caesar best when we serve God first. And we serve God first by deepening our Catholic faith and then acting on our Catholic convictions. If we don't live our Catholic beliefs vigorously and without apologies – both in private and in public -- we're stealing from the moral discourse that makes a democracy work. Being quiet about our faith is not good manners. It's a form of cowardice. A moment ago I mentioned the importance of "proper obedience to authority." I did not say "obedience to proper authority." The words sound similar, and they are. They're also true and important. But they don't mean quite the same thing.

As Christians, Scripture tells us that we have a serious obligation to respect and obey secular authority, whether we agree with all of its policies or not. The reason is simple. All authority ultimately derives from God and is accountable to Him. In the military that duty is especially urgent because if some people don't obey, other people can die.

But no secular authority can ever override the obligations of our conscience as Catholics, especially on matters involving basic human dignity and the sanctity of innocent life. Genocide is always gravely wrong. Deliberately targeting civilians in combat is always gravely wrong. Abortion, infanticide and euthanasia are always gravely wrong. There are no exceptions, because all of these evil actions intentionally attack the innocent. No authority can legitimately demand our cooperation in intrinsically evil acts -- and authority loses its legitimacy when it tries to do so.

Proper obedience means obedience lived with humility and unselfishness – but also with brains and a conscience. Conscience doesn't drop out of the sky fully formed. It's not a feeling or an opinion or a personal preference. Conscience is the hammer of Christian self-mastery. It's the voice of God in our hearts. We learn to hear God's voice by cultivating our moral judgment with the truth. And we find the truth in Scripture, in prayer and in the teaching of the Catholic faith Christ gave us for our salvation. The essential thing is this: We're not robots. Obedience to the law is never an excuse for supporting or colluding in grave evil. We're moral agents, and God will hold each of us responsible for our decisions, choices and actions.

Obedience is also never an excuse for being stupid. All of you in this room tonight rank in the top 10 percent of America's most talented and motivated young leaders. That's pretty extraordinary. It has big implications for your lives. It also has big implications for the rest of us around the country, because we're all going to suffer if you choose to be naïve, selfish or dumb. What I mean is this. A representative democracy like the United States depends for its freedom on leaders and citizens who know how to think -- in other words, people with morally formed and critically sharpened minds, and the eagerness to use them. But in practice, much of our popular culture now operates like a narcotic. It dumbs-down our news and politics, bleaches out our beliefs, and reshapes our opinions. This has unhappy consequences. Real democracy requires a vigorous, intelligent, shared public commitment to the common good. It dies in a culture addicted to the pursuit of individual appetites and insecurities. And I believe it's reasonable to ask whether the latter is what we're becoming.

A lot of factors have brought us to this point. But our mass media have certainly played a role. Partly because they claim to be above the news and simply reporting it, or because they provide an entertainment service that people theoretically have the freedom to ignore, the news and entertainment industries have too often avoided responsibility for their own inadequacies and misuse of their liberties. Healthy public discourse depends on fair and comprehensive information offered in a useful context. Very little of that was evident in the last election cycle. But I'll give you a more innocent example from just last week.

Last week the Wall Street Journal and NBC News reported on the strong popular support President Obama now enjoys and that 41 percent of Americans believe the country is moving in the right direction. The New York Times reported similar information. One of the major television news anchors attributed the strong polling numbers to the president's "astounding" salesmanship. Other major news figures enthused about the success of the president's personality and policies so far.

Now please note that I pray for the president every day. We all should. That's both a patriotic and a Christian duty. Catholics and all Americans need to support our elected leaders in all ways and on all issues that are morally appropriate. My comments here are in no way directed at any public servant in Washington or anywhere else. They're directed at how news is reported -- or not reported -- and how that news is framed.

The same media stories noting that 41 percent of Americans now believe the country is moving in the

right direction also mentioned that 44 percent believe it's not. But in general, that detail did not get highlighted. Even more curious was the absence, or the selectivity, in many news reports regarding historically comparative data – in other words, context. What I mean is this. Polling records show that exactly eight years ago, in March 2001, after a bitterly controversial election which the Democratic presidential candidate actually won in popular votes but lost in the Electoral College, 52 percent of Americans nonetheless believed the nation was moving in the right direction, while 38 percent did not.

In February 2005, after another bitter election and in the middle of an unpopular war that U.S. forces were actually losing at the time, 42 percent of Americans believed the country was moving in the right direction, and 48 percent did not.

If we can learn anything from polling data, it's that we need to be very modest in drawing any big conclusions from the data at all. We should be wary of believing those who do – and even more importantly, we should note that polling data can sometimes be made to show just about anything we want.

This is why morally formed, critically developed minds are so vital. If we lose the ability to reason clearly, based on accurate information, then we lose the ability to be free. As citizens, that means we need to subject the press in our country to the same hard scrutiny and high standards of accountability to which they hold everyone else.

Here's my final point. People, not things, finally matter. Mao Zedong was one of the true moral monsters of the last century. But he was also a keenly astute tactician and strategist. He once wrote that:

Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale. Military and economic power is necessarily wielded by people ("On Protracted War," Selected Works, Vol. II).

Wisdom is wisdom, even when it comes from an evil man. Our political structures as a free people are the product of great moral and intellectual sophistication. But in daily life, most Americans are pragmatists. We're problem solvers. We're tool makers. That's why Americans have always been so good at creating and applying new technologies. In the end, though, all great achievements and all great struggles are determined by people -- not things. If you want to shape history, you do it by shaping the mind and the soul of other human beings.

A life lived honorably always bears fruit in the souls of the people who follow us. As I was gathering my thoughts for tonight I remembered a story about a friend. Years ago he and his brother wrote a very moving article about visiting the Vietnam Memorial and finding the name of their father engraved on the wall. Their dad was a Marine Corps civil affairs officer killed in action in 1968. My friend was once asked whether he felt his dad's sacrifice had really been worth it, given all that has happened in our country since then, and all the burdens he, his brother and their mother had to bear in his father's absence. He said yes – immediately, without reservation. His father died serving people he believed in, my friend said; the Vietnamese people he wanted to help. And that witness of service has shaped the life of my friend and his brother ever since.

Some of the people here tonight may know the friend I'm talking about: Dr. John Hittinger, who taught here at the academy until a few years ago. He and his brother Russ are now two of the finest Catholic scholars in the United States.

A life lived honorably always bears fruit in the souls of the people who follow us. So live honorably, serve unselfishly, think clearly and love your Catholic faith. We love our nation best when we offer it the best we have -- the witness of our convictions. We serve our country best when we serve God first.

Thanks very much.