

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki  
Class of 2015 Affirmation Ceremony  
United States Military Academy, West Point, NY  
18 August, 2013  
Remarks as Prepared

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Good evening, everyone. I am honored to be here.

General Clarke, thank you for that generous introduction. To you and Mrs. Clarke, many thanks for your service and your leadership. Let me also acknowledge and offer my thanks and appreciation to:

- General and Mrs. Caslen
- General Trainor, Colonel Brazil
- CSM Duane and Ms. Grim
- The Heads of the academic departments, two of whom, Colonels Mat Moten and Scott Krawczyk, served closely with me on the Army Staff. I am still indebted to them.
- Members of the Class of 1965—18 of us here this evening; with spouses, we are 26. Too many to name, but let me recognize our class president, Major General (Retired) Clair Gill, and thank him for his leadership of “Strength and Drive!”
- And most importantly, the men and women of the Class of 2015, so ably led by Cadet Will Goodwin, your Class President;
- Other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

My name is Ric Shinseki, and I am privileged to represent the distinguished Class of 1965, this evening. I speak for the class when I say we are so very proud to be affiliated with this outstanding Class of 2015. Congratulations! Thank you for your commitment and the oath you will be taking in a few minutes.

As West Point traditions go, this affirmation ceremony would be considered still young, but it already endures as a tradition because the pairing of classes 50 years apart reinforces the sense of continuity and timeless value that are so much the fabric of West Point.

Had affiliated classes existed when the Class of '65 was in attendance, our affiliation would have been with the remarkable Class of 1915; 59 of its 164 graduates went on to serve as general officers, most of them as combat leaders during World War II.

While not affiliated through an affirmation ceremony like this one, the Class of 1915 was, indeed, here on 9 June 1965, when I and my classmates crossed the plain for the last time as cadets.

Omar Bradley, Dwight Eisenhower, Joe McNarney, James Van Fleet, among many others—these were leaders of enormous character, deep resolve, and remarkable abilities, who had helped to shepherd our country, and the world, through some of the darkest days in human history, before emerging victorious from the great strategic challenge that was World War II.

On their graduation day in 1915, could they have anticipated the storms, dangers, and demands for leadership they would encounter—two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the dawn of nuclear weaponry? I don't think so. Yet, they rose magnificently to each of those challenges, and more, on their watch. They had been prepared well, and their education and training here at West Point was crucial to that preparation.

I don't think my classmates and I were any better at anticipating the storms, dangers, and demands for leadership we, and the country, would face as we took our commissioning oath on 9 June 1965, even though our time here at West Point had witnessed the construction of the Berlin Wall, a harbinger of things to come; the Cuban Missile Crisis, when a courageous, young President Kennedy took on the Soviet Union, forcing it to back down without any shots fired; and then, the assassination of that same President about a year later in November 1963.

Ahead of us lay Vietnam; the Cold War, which we would help to bring to conclusion in Europe; and the untidiness of the Post-Soviet Union period, which lingers, even today.

No one here, this evening, can predict the challenges and calls to duty you will face either. But they will come, uninvited, just as surely as they did for the Class of 1915, and also for my class. Can you prepare for the unknown? We have in the past, and you will, as well.

West Point has produced men and women of character, for over two centuries now, who have met these challenges—no matter how difficult, no matter how unexpected, no matter how ill defined. Duty. Honor. Country. These are not merely words on plaques and wall hangings. They are the steady drum rolls, through time, which connect all of us—1815, 1865, 1915, 1965—and now you, the class of 2015. “The Long Grey Line of us stretches thro’ the years of a century told”—that oft-repeated line from “The Corps.”

What you learn here; the time you invest in developing personal skills, knowledge, and attributes; the relationships you form with classmates, instructors, tactical cadre, officer and enlisted; and your adherence to the values that will bind you to every other Soldier upon commissioning—these are what will sustain you on the days when the profession asks the most of you.

Loyalty. Duty. Respect. Selfless Service. Honor. Integrity. Personal Courage. These seven values define the Army you will enter in May 2015. I was privileged to be in the room as the note taker when they were approved as the Army's values. Generals with names like Reimer, Griffith, Joulwan, Peay, Tilelli, Clark, Hartzog, Bramlett, and Wilson wrestled with each other over these seven principles. Why isn't competence on this list? You will note that competence did not make the final cut. What do you mean by honor? How do you measure integrity? For three and a half hours, with sleeves rolled up, they debated, challenged, and finally came to agreement. I was privileged to watch probably the nine most powerful military commanders in the world define their profession for the future. I wondered, at the time, whether similar debates went on in the conference rooms of other armies and other professions to get it right for their futures.

As a young commander serving in Cold War Germany, I heard one of our senior generals declare in a Memorial Day Speech: "I know that when I die, I will die a free man, on my feet, not on my knees, with my head up, not bowed." Then he pointed east and said, "and not far from here, there are people, a whole nation in fact, who cannot say that and would not really understand the fundamental importance of those words."

Well, his words struck me. I realized that I had been taking the privilege of my American citizenship a bit for granted. You see, those words are my legacy, as well. "I know that when I die, I will die a free man, on my feet, not on my knees, with my head up, not bowed." And those words are your legacy also.

Only the free, who cherish freedom and love liberty enough to fight for it, can bequeath such a legacy to others. The shackled cannot. And the free, who are not willing to fight and die

for it, cannot. Only the free, who cherish freedom and love liberty enough to fight for it, can bequeath the gift of freedom to others—as members of the Long Grey Line have for more than 200 years now, and as young men and women wearing our uniforms are doing on operation tonight.

Welcome to the profession of arms. You are privileged to be standing amongst the men and women, who will be helping our country navigate the next 40 years. The country will need and expect you to help lead it through dangers and challenges, yet unforeseen. There is a great Army out there in need of inspired and inspiring leadership. And there are great Soldiers out there awaiting your skills, knowledge, and attributes to make them whole as units and as an Army.

In the ranks of the Class of 1965 stands the 55<sup>th</sup> Superintendent of this academy, stands a Medal of Honor recipient, stands a long held prisoner of war in Hanoi, stand retired Soldiers, highly successful business entrepreneurs, authors, engineers, educators, and a host of other talented and experienced graduates. We are proud of this Class of 2015. Grip hands. Grip hands, now. We are here to help and support you as you prepare for your service to the Nation.

And in the year 2063, when my classmates and I are long gone, one of you will stand on a stage like this, perhaps this one, with the storms, dangers, and demands of your lifetime behind you, having safeguarded the American people—one of you will be privileged, as I am this evening, to thank, congratulate, and offer words of encouragement to the West Point Class of 2065.

How we all envy you, with so much potential and opportunity before you. If I had to do it all over again, I would marry the same woman and join the United States Army. These have been the two best decisions of my life.

God bless each and every one of you, and may God continue to bless this wonderful country of ours. Thank you.