



Lt Gen Bauernfeind, USAFA Superintendent
Graduation Speech to the Class of 2026

Good morning and welcome as we celebrate the United States Air Force Academy class of 2026.

Today, we are honored to welcome the 50th Vice President of our United States, Vice President Vance. Sir, you do us an honor by being with us today. We are also honored to welcome:

- the 27th Secretary of our Air Force, the Honorable Troy Mink and his spouse, Jean.
- the 24th Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Kenneth Wilsbach and his wife Sydney
- and the second chief of space operations for the US Space Force, General Chance Saltzman and his spouse, Jennifer.

Welcome.

And to many other distinguished visitors, thank you for being here today, as well as the many members of the long blue line of academy graduates, local leaders, and community partners that make our mission happen. Thank you for all that you do from Colorado Springs to Washington DC throughout our military community. We could not succeed without your support.

Now to the Class of 2026, congratulations.

After four years of challenging military training, academics, and athletics, your day one has arrived.

But let's take you back to day one. 23 June 2022 on I-Day. You stepped onto those footprints in the cadet area with a vision of what the next four years would look like. Chances are the last 47 months have looked a little different than you expected.

But I can tell you that I'm extremely proud of how you tackled the challenges and the changes that we have made at the academy during your journey. This last year in particular, we witnessed you step into your leadership role as Firsties, and you simply delivered excellence.

You embraced warrior ethos, upheld our standards, tackled warfighter training, hit the books hard, and you left it all on the athletic fields.

Today, you are the warrior leaders that we need to lead in our Air Force and Space Force.

But before you think about that next chapter, reflect upon all the support that you have received. And take a moment to thank your friends, your families, your sponsor families, and your support networks because they've been with you throughout your time here at USAFA.

Also take time to recognize and thank the leaders you've become with the help of your squadron commanders, your academy military trainers, your incredible faculty and instructors, your hardworking coaches and trainers, and your mentors across the Academy.

So, please join me in a round of applause for everybody that's gotten you to this point.

Class of 2026, your graduation coincides with a national historical moment. The 250th anniversary of the founding of this great nation. For two and a half centuries, the flame of American liberty has not burned on its own. It has been kept alive by generations of men and women willing to hold the front line. It has been defended by those who chose to serve something greater than themselves. As we reflect on 250 years of freedom, that is the legacy that you inherit today.

But inheriting a legacy is not enough. You must be equipped and ready to carry it forward into a very unpredictable future.

And that's exactly why we focus on forging war fighters to win, inspiring leaders of character equality, and motivating critical thinkers to adapt. Our nation requires it, and it demands it, especially in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape that you are stepping into. And you have met the challenge across each of our priorities.

So, we have a parting gift for you.

If you would look behind you on the middle chair of the stadium, we are unveiling our priorities in the ring of honor.

Your legacy as future war fighters, leaders, and critical thinkers will live on as a reminder of the skills that our graduates bring to future fights. It's the same skills that those who came before you employed to defend our country. From the Berlin Airlift to Desert Storm to Enduring Freedoms and so many other missions in

between. And the same skills you will carry with you throughout your Air Force and Space Force careers.

And while we are looking around the stadium, I'd like to direct your attention to the big screens where we'd like to recognize your classmates who aren't with us today because they are competing in the NCAA championships.

Zack Ayers, India Jones, Jet Rose, Ben Sheller, and Texas Tanner are demonstrating their warrior ethos with the best of the best from across the nation and they are representing Falcon Nation strong.

If you're listening, we wish you luck and please know that your coaches have your degrees for you.

Class of 2026, in this year of cadet empowerment, you elevated our 47-month journey to be even more rigorous, more realistic, and more relevant across all three mission areas: military, academics, and athletics.

You took care of your mission and you took care of your people. You lived up to your "no quit, all grit" motto every step of the way.

As warfighters to win, you embrace the warrior ethos with a focus on readiness in all forms, physical, mental, spiritual. You are offensively minded, mission-focused, and team builders who overcame adversity to make the mission happen.

You took our culminating exercise to the next level against a thinking adversary, setting a high bar for those classes that will follow you to not only meet but to exceed. You are leaving the academy in a better place than when you entered it, as you will do with every assignment you take in your future.

As warrior scholars, you integrated rigorous academics, immersive training, and cutting-edge research to prepare you for combat leadership. Your education was deliberately designed to ensure you are the war fighters who can outthink, outmaneuver, and outfight our adversaries. From putting satellites into space to winning numerous national competitions to providing research to support our operational forces, you advanced our strategic advantage as airmen and guardians.

And as athletes over the past four years, you were warriors through every competition, which led to your classmates earning 181 all-American honors, 12 conference championships, 14 conference players of the year, and 18 top 25 national team finishes. Absolutely well done.

And while I know you all look forward to linking arms with your joint partners in the next fight, it's important to highlight what you did with them over the last four

years. And this year, against our military service academies and intercollegiate sports, you dominated with an overall record of 54 wins, 45 losses, and three ties. When you add in our competitive club teams this year alone, USAFA was 20 and 9 against West Point and 14-9 against Navy, reminding West Point and Annapolis that the Air Force Academy remains far, far above.

As leaders of character and quality, you chose Master Sergeant John Chapman as your class exemplar. For those of you unfamiliar, each class in our academy selects an exemplar whose qualities they hope to emulate. Every time someone says [the class year], they shout the nickname of their exemplar.

Master Sergeant Chapman is notably the first enlisted service member to be selected as an exemplar. He was a special tactics combat controller and in 2002, then technical sergeant Chapman charged into an al Qaeda bunker in the snowy Afghan mountains, saving the lives of an entire rescue team, losing his own life in the process.

He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism. The only Air Force Medal of Honor recipient since the Vietnam War, Master Sergeant Chapman embodies our core values and commitment to serve, leadership your class aspires to as leaders of character and quality.

And we would like to take a moment and recognize Master Sergeant Chapman's family who are with us today. It is an honor to have you here with us on this special occasion. To the Chapman family, thank you.

Like your exemplar, you made hard calls and faced adversity, knowing that leaders do the right thing the right way, even if it's unpopular. As servant-leaders, our airmen and our guardians deserve this. Our missions require this and our nation demands nothing less.

Finally, as critical thinkers to adapt, you learn to develop innovative solutions to complex problems while operating with limited information. You prepared for modern and future warfare in the air, space, and cyber domains, ensuring we maintain our advantage for the joint force. You challenge the status quo, building teams to tackle problems from multiple perspectives.

Our future success depends on your continued critical thought. And if your success leading the cadet wing this year is any indication, I know that our nation's future is in great hands.

When given the challenge to lead reinvigorated military training, you ran with that charge and ensured your squadrons are ready for the most extensive and challenging warfighting culminating exercise in Air Force Academy history.

When some said we focus too much on joint warfighter training at the expense of other training, you were the instructor pilots that delivered 100% soaring syllabus completion and 35% more of you secured pilot slots than last year's class, proving that you were ready to fly, fight, and win.

When some question our academic rigor, our progressive use of artificial intelligence, you led the Cadet Wing, to the highest GPA in 20 years and the lowest academic probation level in 5 years.

And you secured our academy, the only service academy I might note, on Forbe's top 10 public schools for innovation and integration of artificial intelligence.

When fitness standards were set higher, and some thought more would fail, you led the Cadet Wing to the highest physical fitness scores that this academy has seen in over 10 years.

And finally, all of your successes are inspiring the next generation of classes. And we're proud to report that we've seen over an 11% increase in applications for the incoming class of 2030 due to your hard work.

Class of 2026, your day one has arrived. You are ready.

And I will leave you with these last thoughts.

The weapons school mantra comes to my mind: Be humble. Be approachable. Be credible.

Be humble. Your class has incredible talents. And as leaders, remember that you are entering a force that has decades of experience. Take the time to listen. Listen, and learn from your team's years of being in the fight.

Be approachable. Build teams and lift them up where every single member is seen, heard, and valued. When you execute this successfully and you hold the standards high, your team will outperform your mission and your expectations.

And be credible. Always be a master of your craft. Be the go-to expert wherever you go. And always be ready when the nation calls. Be credible for yourself.

Be credible for your team and be credible for your adversaries because they are watching, and I know they do not want to challenge you.

Class of 2026, you brought it strong. You sprinted to the finish line, and I am exceptionally proud of each and every one of you.

I can personally attest that you are the warrior-leaders that our nation deserves.

Congratulations and fight on.