

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Brig. Gen. Linell Letendre and Dr. Jennifer Weber – U.S. Air Force Academy Convocation on August 6, 2021

Brig. Gen. Linell Letendre:

Good morning, Class of 2025! Welcome to Convocation and the kickoff of the Academic Year! I'd like to thank Lt Gen Clark, our USAFA Senior Leaders as well as many friends and family joining the faculty and academic staff for this important milestone.

To start, I'd like to flashback a few years...twenty-seven to be exact...when I was sitting in my core philosophy class here at the United States Air Force Academy. My professor, General-retired Mal Wakin kept asking me questions with no right answer. Like most students, I hated that. I loved his class though. We explored a range of moral theories and then applied them to contemporary problems, including those we would soon face as military officers. I, along with all members of the Long Blue Line, share common memories of our professors (like Dr Wakin) probing, questioning, and pushing us to think deeper, to dissect our assumptions, and to articulate our views clearly.

I'll admit...back then, I just wanted my teachers to tell me "what" we needed to know. Now, as your Dean of the Faculty, I know better. The skills and habits of mind my classmates and I developed in our philosophy classes and throughout our courses at the Academy were imperative. Our faculty, both then and now, did not teach us what to think...they taught us how.

You, our fourth class cadets, are curious and intelligent observers of the world, far more so than me at your age. You think and communicate at the speed of light because you grew up in today's fast-paced digital world. You do not need encouragement to think orthogonally or to explore energetically. Instead...I would submit...you need now what I needed then: a way to connect your passion and courage with a capacity to think critically and communicate clearly. I believe that connection is best made through the structure and rigor of a broad education. The very type of education you will receive here at the US Air Force Academy.

So why the imperative for this type of education? Simply put, because the future of conflict demands no less. Despite being objectively the most powerful nation in the world, the United States faces a vast array of challenges in the decades to come. Some of them are evident: near-peer competitors like China and Russia, aspiring powers like Iran and North Korea, endemic threats of terrorism, cyber criminals, nuclear proliferation. But for every threat that is known, there are more we do not yet see or recognize; or as you'll learn in your military strategy class...for every pink flamingo, there is a black swan.

You...the future leaders of the profession of arms...must operate—and succeed—in the realm of the unknown. By the time you graduate and commission as second lieutenants, you must possess a sophisticated combination of knowledge, skills, and acumen to support and defend the Constitution...and our Nation.

And that is precisely what the members of this faculty will provide you over the next four years. We will expose you to a vast array of concepts, ideas, theories, and worldviews across a spectrum of disciplines. We expect many of these perspectives will be new and, yes, challenging for you to wrestle with, understand, and interpret. This is not about teaching the latest theory of the day. Rather, our obligation is to equip you with a toolkit of lenses through which to analyze future conflicts or crises. You must be able to view the battlefield through the perspectives of both allies and adversaries; understand the full potential of future technologies; critique our own strategies to anticipate and diminish the inevitable fog and friction of war; lead a force that reflects both the values and demographics of America; and employ a uniquely Air Force and Space Force concept of thinking over challenges, not through them.

To start you on this educational journey, we chose *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei as our shared One Book, One USAFA. Friends and family, if you haven't heard about this book from your cadet, ask them. Each cadet received a copy of this graphic novel on I-day.

You've already heard from Dr Weber about her take-aways from the text. But let me briefly share some of mine. I am struck by how this book aligns to our mission to develop leaders...in fact, it directly parallels our Leader of Character Framework. You all remember Gen Clark's talk with you on I-Day.

What's the first tenet of the Leader of Character Framework—LIVE HONORABLY. Living honorably requires that we consistently practice the virtues embodied in the core values. We saw this perseverance and commitment to live honorably by George's parents. Remember when George's folks make the hard decision about how they would answer the loyalty questions? Even though the consequences of remaining true to their values were extraordinarily difficult, they chose the hard right over the easy wrong. They demonstrated what commitment and perseverance to one's values is all about.

What was that second step in the LoC Framework? Lift others. George's parents again show us what lifting others means in practice. They created unity and purpose for those in the internment camps: starting schools and serving as a block manager. Or do you remember the Quaker missionary, Herbert Nicholson, who lifted others by delivering books from the local bookstore and taking pets to the vet? Even George himself, as a young boy, demonstrated how to lift up others. Remember when he recognized Santa...and didn't share the true identity with his siblings? Think about the power and impact of lifting others.

And that leads to the last step of the LoC Framework...Elevate performance toward a common and noble purpose. For me, one of the most courageous examples of elevating performance occurred when George's father—despite having been imprisoned by his own country—sat George down and said “Our democracy is a participatory democracy” and is “dependent on people who cherish the shining, highest ideals of our democracy”.

In the end it was his father who inspired George to elevate his performance...and to embrace his role in our shared democracy. In fact, George Takei closes his book with “We are here as Americans who believe in the cherished ideals of our people's democracy.”

Yes we chose our One Book, One USAFA this year to help you begin your leadership and character development journey. To provide a different lens through which to view the world. George Takei

showed us his character development journey in *They Called Us Enemy*. He portrayed examples of perseverance, grace, and courage to not just survive but to thrive.

My charge to you as future leaders is to ask questions, challenge assumptions, craft innovative solutions, and possess a critical mind and critical ear—not just critical words. As future leaders of a diverse force, warfighters in an ambiguous environment, and servants of this nation, such skills are not mere niceties. They are strategic military imperatives.

So who will help you on this developmental journey? Well look around you...The builders of your foundation include your faculty and academic staff, your AOCs and AMTs, your coaches, and your instructors at the airfield. And just like my professor, Gen Wakin, they are here to equip you with different lenses through which to see the world. Together, we will guide you and challenge you. And above all, we will help you thrive at USAFA.

You know who else will help you thrive? Look at the support system behind you. Your friends and family both here and those at home rooting for your success. Just like we saw with George Takai, your support system will sustain you and provide strength to flourish.

And So Class of 2025, I just have two questions before you kick off the Academic Year.

Do I want you just to survive here at USAFA? NO MA'AM

What should you do instead? THRIVE!!!

Dr. Jennifer Weber:

Close your eyes. I want you to imagine this. OK, imagine that someone one day knocks on your front door and forces you and your family out of your home. You didn't do anything wrong. No one in your family did anything wrong -- except be Jewish, or Muslim, or Catholic, or Black, or Latino, or gay, or Asian. You're all whisked away, leaving your pets, your house, your family business, your friends -- everything beyond what you can fit in one suitcase -- behind. You're taken to an ugly, barren place where the wind never stops blowing, where it's bone-chillingly cold or blistering hot, and sand and dust are impossible to keep out of your tiny, sparse, uninsulated new quarters. Barbed wire and guard towers ring this place, and the guards and their guns are pointing into the camp -- at *you*. Again, you've done nothing wrong. No one here in this new place has. No one has been tried or found guilty of *anything*. Yet you're stuck here for the next three and a half years. How would you feel about this? What would you do?

Open your eyes now.

This was the situation a young George Takei and his family found themselves in. Their crime was being Japanese -- Japanese, in the eyes of the government, even though many internees, like young George, were naturalized citizens or were born and raised in the United States.

There's a lot of fuss these days about whether to ignore the ugly parts of American history. Those stories can make us uncomfortable. I don't think we can or should paper over things that

make us uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable with the past is *our* problem, not history's. Because bad things happened, and bad things *still* happen. History is the story of being human, and humans sometimes do terrible things to each other. If we don't know what we did wrong in the past, if we never even *learn* about our mistakes as a nation, how do we avoid making the same errors in the future? If we don't know what the problems are – engineers, I'm talking to you now – how do we fix them?

There's another argument to be made for ensuring that we look honestly at our past. And that is that people do *remarkable* things even in the most awful circumstances. History is not just about the ugly things that humans do, but also about amazing acts of bravery, grit, grace, and kindness amid tragedy.

So the story of Japanese internment is not just that of one of the worst calamities the American government has inflicted upon its own citizens, but also the story of resilience, patriotism, and an ongoing belief in American values and justice. At the Amache camp, which is just a three-hour drive from here in eastern Colorado, the internees got busy creating a community. They had schools, a co-op store, they raised their children and buried their dead. And these internees, many of them California farmers, planted gardens. To the astonishment of nearby residents, the internees were able to raise fruits, vegetables, and flowers that the locals didn't think could ever grow there. Some of them started asking the internees for advice about their own victory gardens.

Like all 10 of the nation's internment camps, Amache sent young men off to the 442nd infantry, an 18,000-man unit composed entirely of Japanese Americans. This regiment was active in southern France and was instrumental in helping to drive the Germans out of Italy. Along the way, it became the most decorated unit in American history for its size and length of service. Thousands of medals were bestowed on the 442nd, including 21 Medals of Honor seven Presidential Unit Citations. Think about that for a moment. These men, many of whose families were incarcerated unfairly, rising above and proving their worth and their dignity. Proving that they, too, were patriotic Americans willing to give their all in defense of their country.

Back home, other brave Nisei were fighting President Roosevelt's order that had imprisoned 120,000 people without any due process. Aspiring lawyers, take note. In one of those cases, *Korematsu vs. United States*, the Supreme Court found that internment was legal. In two other cases, *Hirabayashi vs. United States* and *Yasui vs. United States*, the court ruled that a curfew for Japanese and Japanese Americans was constitutional. Scholars today consider these rulings as being among the worst decisions in the history of the court. Chief Justice John Roberts explicitly repudiated the Hirabayashi case three years ago, and the court formally reversed its decision in the Hirabayashi and Yasui cases in the 1980s.

So, people make mistakes. Big ones. Some of those mistakes affect thousands, even millions, of people. Roosevelt's Order 9066 is as shameful a presidential directive as we've ever had in this country. So were the original decisions in the Korematsu, Hirabayashi and Yasui cases. The

nation has sought to make amends, paying out reparations in 1988, but as Takei notes toward the end of his book, that didn't bring back those years that a boy and his family lost to an internment camp, the economic losses they suffered, or the humiliation they experienced.

And yet, even amid the tragedy of internment – the stress, the despair, the sadness -- we see some of the best of the human spirit emerge: community, beauty, heroism, creativity, resistance to injustice. All things which, I can't help but note, we see play out on decks of Takei's starship *Enterprise* over and over again.

I leave you, then, with two thoughts. First: We have to confront the demons of the past honestly. We cannot change the past, but addressing it in a straightforward manner can help us build a better future. Second: You, too, will face – have already faced – very stressful situations in your time here at the Academy. Know that you, too, have the power and strength to overcome, to persevere, to create beauty, to form a community, and to stand up to injustice.

I wish you the very best of luck this year as you walk into your own future.