

**THE SECOND KENNETH GRAY &  
PHYLLIS PROPP-FOWLE LECTURE ON DIVERSITY,  
EQUITY, AND INCLUSION\***

LIEUTENANT GENERAL (RETIRED) FLORA D. DARPINO<sup>†</sup>

Introduction

I want to thank you all for attending, although I know it is mandatory for some of you. I also want to thank the honored guests that are in attendance: Lieutenant General Stuart Risch, the Honorable Carrie Ricci, and Brigadier General Alison Martin. It is wonderful to see you all. General Nardotti and Susan, it is a special pleasure to see you here. I am going to say that it is truly an honor to speak at the Second Gray & Propp-Fowle Lecture. I never met Lieutenant Colonel Propp-Fowle, but I know she achieved so much in her lifetime. It is amazing to think of the model

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<sup>†</sup> Lieutenant General (Retired) Flora D. Darpino served as The 39th Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Army. She received a direct commission into the Judge Advocate General's Corps in January of 1987. Lieutenant General (Retired) Darpino received a bachelor of arts degree from Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, a juris doctor from Rutgers University in New Jersey, and a master of laws degree in Military Law from The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School. Her military education includes the Senior Service College Fellowship (Department of Justice), the Army Command and General Staff College, the Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, Combined Arms and Services Staff School, and the Judge Advocate Officer Basic Course. Her previous assignments include: Trial Defense Counsel and Chief, Civil Law Division, VII Corps in Stuttgart, Germany; Training Officer and Assistant Operations Officer for the U.S. Army Trial Defense Service and Litigation Attorney, Litigation Division, U.S. Army Legal Services Agency; Chief, Administrative Law, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Assistant Executive Officer, Office of The Judge Advocate General; Chief, Judge Advocate Recruiting Office; Staff Judge Advocate, 4th Infantry Division at Fort Hood, Texas and Tikrit, Iraq; Deputy Staff Judge Advocate, III Corps at Fort Hood; Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of The Judge Advocate General; Staff Judge Advocate, V Corps, in Heidelberg, Germany; Staff Judge Advocate, United States Forces-Iraq, in Baghdad, Iraq; Commander and Commandant, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School; Chief Judge, U.S. Army Court of Criminal Appeals; and Commander, U.S. Army Legal Services Agency.

that she was for all of us. We understand that she paved the way for us, every one of us. Thus, to give a lecture in her name is humbling.

Then, there is General Gray. I met General Gray when I was a second-term captain. I was stationed in Washington, D.C., at the U.S. Army Legal Services Agency (USALSA). I was at the Trial Defense Service (TDS) Headquarters, and General Gray was the USALSA commander at the time. I have a picture of him presenting me with an award where I am very pregnant with my first daughter. I remember him being so kind, and all us captains just adored him. He was warm, engaging, and an inspirational leader. When he was selected to be the Assistant Judge Advocate General with General Nardotti as The Judge Advocate General (TJAG), we, as captains, rejoiced at that leadership team. They led our Corps through a culture change. We talk about being a profession of arms and a profession of law, and it was General Nardotti and General Gray who led that culture change. When I was selected to be The 39th Judge Advocate General, the Deputy Judge Advocate General, Tom Ayres, and I sat down, and we decided that we wanted to do our very best to emulate the team of Generals Nardotti and Gray. That is how inspirational of a leader General Gray was, along with General Nardotti. I hope I do not let him down and make him proud at this second lecture.

I will approach this as I approach most things in my life. First, I'll share anecdotes in old war stories, which is what we do when we get old. But I will also lean heavily on the lessons I learned in my youth from my parents.

### Family Upbringing

My parents were children of the Depression, but they were also children of parents that all came from Italy. My father grew up in abject poverty on a farm where they had enough food to feed themselves but not enough to support themselves. My mother grew up in Northern New Jersey, where there was running water and electricity, which they considered a big deal because that meant my father "married up." My father spoke Italian and did not speak English until he attended grade school. He was lucky to graduate from high school; his two older siblings never even graduated from grade school because they had to work on the farm. While my mother had indoor plumbing, she was raised by immigrants who had to work more than one job, as many immigrants do today, to support the family. They worked hard at those jobs. When the Depression hit, it was my grandmother that supported the three of them by working in a weaving mill in North Jersey, where I am sure they locked

all the exits. I do not know if they actually locked the doors, but it was commonplace at the time.

One event changed the trajectory of my family, and that was the G.I. Bill. It allowed my father to go to college. He was sitting in a kitchen with his oldest brother when President Truman announced the G.I. Bill. It could have been as soon as the next morning when my father got in line and enlisted in the Army. I will tell you right now he hated every single minute of it. He never had anything good to say about the Army. So, it is very clear that my father did not inspire me to serve. As Italian Americans who lived through World War II with Mussolini and the Italians on the enemies list, my parents taught us many lessons. I'll mention three in particular: the first was that, in order to be considered equal, we had to be better than those around us. We also could never give anything less than our best. And lastly, we had to remember that people were always watching us. They also stated that each generation had to be better than the generation before them. My mother told us, her daughters, that we had to be strong, independent, and capable of supporting ourselves because we never knew what was going to happen to our spouses. I can honestly say my childhood was more shaped by my Italian identity than it ever was by the fact I was a woman. However, I soon learned the tools my parents gave me worked just as well when I joined a male-dominated profession, the law, in a male-dominated organization, the Army.

Now, some of you may know, my husband and I went to Gettysburg College together and he was a Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadet. We married after law school, at which time I decided to join the military 100 percent so I did not have to take another bar exam. When I told my father, who never had a good day in the Army, that I was joining the Army, he said to me, "Maybe it will be different because you are an officer." Even my father did not realize or take into consideration the fact I was a woman.

#### Early Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps Career

My Officer Basic Course in 1987 was a wonderful experience. There were about twelve women in our class of approximately ninety Soldiers. I was the only married female of the twelve. The JAG Corps was eight percent female, and the highest-ranking women officers were two lieutenant colonels. Of the twelve women or so, I think it is important for you to know four of us stayed on active duty and we achieved some pretty good success. Three of us were division staff judge advocates (SJAs). Then-Lieutenant Colonel Kathryn Stone was the 10th Mountain Division SJA and she deployed to Afghanistan, being the first female division SJA

in an active combat zone. The other two were then-Lieutenant Colonel Sharon Riley, who was the 1st Armored Division SJA, and me as the 4th Infantry Division SJA. Both then-Lieutenant Colonel Riley and I deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom. The fourth was Lieutenant Colonel Denise Council-Ross, she led a Trial Defense Service region. Out of the twelve women I came in with, the four that remained on active duty rose to some prominent positions, and I find that very impressive. I honestly believe it is because the Schoolhouse set us up for success, even if there were pockets of resistance throughout our careers.

When I reported into my first assignment in April of 1987 at the Trial Defense Service in Stuttgart, Germany, my boss and senior rater said to me, "I asked them not to send me a woman, but they sent you anyway." I know some of you have heard that before and I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that sounds like a setup, but I did not view it that way. The way I viewed it was they, whoever "they" were, decided to "send me anyway." Even though my boss did not want me, they must have reviewed my record and "they" decided that I was capable of doing the job. I was going to prove "they" were right and he was wrong. To do that, all I had to do was lean back on the lessons my parents taught me. I had to be better than the person I worked with and work harder than them in order to be considered equal. I also had to remember they were always watching. And that is what I did in that assignment. I ultimately believe that I was accepted into the organization.

When I went to Germany, I think it is important to note there was still a West and East Germany and there were over 200,000 Army troops in West Germany. It was a big formation with V Corps and VII Corps also present. I later had the privilege to be the SJA of V Corps with my chief paralegal, Command Sergeant Major Noverlette Roberts. Thank you for attending, SGM Roberts. However, that first assignment was not easy. There was sexual harassment and sexual comments regularly in the workplace. It was very common, and I was expected to either accept or ignore it. I have no doubt they believed because their comments were not about me that I should not be insulted. They did not seem to understand that by objectifying and insulting women, they were denigrating me. They did not understand that by saying women did not belong, I believed they thought I did not belong. They did not seem to grasp that by telling me I was the exception and not like the other women that what they were really saying was not a compliment because what that meant was they really did not think being a woman was okay, exceptions aside.

I was raised again to believe I had to prove myself and my equality. I was taught they were watching and judging, and I worked hard in the courtroom and for my clients and refused to be subjugated. Plus, I was not

alone, and I think that is important for you to know. There were the captains, male and female, and we bonded together. We created an incredible supportive team. If one of the sexual harassers was on the road, we would call each other and ensure no woman was alone in the office when they arrived there. When we would go to social events, the male captains would make sure they sat on each side of the women so no idiot would sit next to them.

We viewed the harassers as the outsiders. We believed we represented the real JAG Corps and the Army because, remember, the real JAG Corps and the Army “sent me anyway.” Plus, at VII Corps, it was a completely different world. The SJA was Colonel Tom Cuthbert followed by Colonel Walt Huffman, who both became general officers, and represented what we viewed as the real JAG Corps. They measured their officers by their ability. Women were treated as equal members of the team. Even as first-term captains, we understood that Cuthbert and Huffman’s type of leadership was the leadership that the JAG Corps and the Army valued because, after all, they were corps SJAs. I finished out my assignment at VII Corps, leaving Germany in April of 1990. The Berlin Wall had been torn down shortly before I left, and I was very pregnant with my first daughter.

### Leadership Lessons

Later that fall, Colonel Huffman and his subordinate SJAs readied for Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He asked his subordinate division SJAs to send him their battle rosters. One battle roster only listed men. Colonel Huffman called the subordinate SJA and told him, “Send me a battle roster that includes your best people, not just your men.” I believe the conversation ended with something like, “If I don’t get a battle roster with your best officers, I believe I will need to find a leader who knows that you take your best into combat.” One of the women who was on a battle roster during Desert Shield and Desert Storm is here today and that is Colonel (Retired) Tara Osborn. Thank you for coming, Tara.

I have thought a lot about that first assignment over the years. It was before the Navy Tailhook scandal and an institutional shift in culture. There was no true system of redress. Plus, right or wrong, we believed blending in was better than standing out. However, I did learn some very important leadership lessons that I talked to other officers about through my career.

The first lesson was that you can learn a lot and as much from a bad leader as you can from a good leader. It is equally important to know what

you should not do as it is to know what you should do. The second lesson was it was critical to understand your sphere of influence so you can affect change. We as captains did not have much of a sphere of influence, but we could keep each other safe. The more you rise through the ranks, the greater your sphere of influence and the greater your ability to affect change. Colonel Huffman was able to force change on those battle rosters. And the time may come when you are in a position to implement widespread systemic change. After all, Colonel Huffman did become TJAG and he selected Kat Stone, Sharon Riley, and Flora Darpino, all from my basic course, to be division SJAs. When each of us deployed, we prepared our own battle rosters and we ensured our best people, both men and women, were on them. Sometimes it takes courage to force change and you have to be up to that challenge when you are faced with it.

After my assignment in D.C. and the L.LM program here at The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). Shortly after my arrival in 1995, a change in the combat exclusion rule took place. For the first time, women could be assigned to brigade staffs in a combat unit. Prior to that, women could not be down at the brigade in a combat unit. Therefore, there were no women in a combat brigade. At the 101st, each brigade headquarters was staffed with an officer trial counsel and a noncommissioned officer (NCO) paralegal. Only the NCO was on the brigade manning document. Our SJA, Colonel Dave Carey, heard rumblings that not all the brigade commanders were happy about the prospect of having women on their staff. When an opening came up for a brigade NCOIC, Colonel Carey selected his best NCO: an NCO that could run like the wind, climb a rope faster than most, do a punishing amount of pull ups and pushups, and a top-notch paralegal and leader. The NCO also just happened to be female. After she reported into the brigade, word spread quickly, that the commander came flying up to the SJA office complaining about the fact that a woman was being assigned to his brigade. Colonel Carey simply told him, "I only assign my best."

We all know how this story goes. Within a short period of time, that brigade legal office was reported hands down as the best office in the brigade. The NCOIC was indispensable to the leadership team, both as a legal professional and as a leader. Her leadership and office management was commended on a regular basis. Well, the time came for that NCOIC to rotate out of the brigade and word spread quickly throughout the office. The commander came flying back into the SJA's office saying, "You can't take my brigade legal NCO"—the exact same person that did not want her at first. Colonel Carey knew what he was doing when he sent the female NCOIC down to that brigade.

Policy can change, but that does not mean people are ready for change. Colonel Carey used his influence to make sure the right person was assigned to the right job. I suspect when the brigade commander complained, he never came right out and said he did not want a woman. However, if you are leader of change and you are not willing to be complicit, you force them to give voice to their true motives. So, when Colonel Carey looked that commander in the eye and told him that he was sending his best, that left the commander with two choices. At that point, the commander had to say, "I don't want a woman," meaning he was discriminating, or he had to accept that female NCO. I find it highly unlikely that other option where he would say, "I do not want your best" was really an option at all. Colonel Carey forced change and he forced the commander's hand. Honestly, Colonel Carey had full faith in the NCO who he knew was right for the job. Given the opportunity, she changed not only the commander's mind, but the course of legal assignments for the entire 101st.

If you put the right people in the right jobs, they will change minds through their actions. Together, the NCO and Colonel Carey forced change. They made sure she succeeded in the position she earned. Colonel Carey also became a general officer in our JAG Corps and Army, because the Army and JAG Corps value that type of leadership. I left the 101st to attend Command and General Staff College.

#### Combat Exclusion Rule

After I attended Command and General Staff College, I landed back in D.C. and I was selected for lieutenant colonel. I learned my new assignment was going to be the SJA for the 4th Infantry Division. I heard rumblings that a number of people were upset that I was selected for the job. I was never sure why people were upset that I was selected for the job. I just finished serving two years in TJAG's front office in a lieutenant colonel position as a major. In keeping with what my parents taught me, I worked harder than I could ever imagine and always gave my best. It was at that point I decided I needed to stop listening to the naysayers because maybe those people who were watching were never going to believe I earned my success. So, I wasn't going to listen to them.

I arrived in Texas in June of 2001. On September 11th, I was standing in my sweaty physical training uniform in the chief of staff's office with the chief and the commanding general (CG). We were looking at the television when the plane hit the second tower of the World Trade Center. The CG turned to me and said, "Flora, go get your uniform on." He then

turned to the chief of staff and said, "Assemble the staff." Everything had changed. I felt like I was meant to be in that job, in that division, on that day. I felt like I belonged there.

As we prepared for our deployment in the winter of 2002 and 2003, gender constraints reared its ugly head again. I was minding my own business when I received a call the CG wanted me in the conference room. Never good, right? I knew I had established my reputation on the staff but we all know sometimes a commander and staff can get confused. Sometimes their anger at the law becomes anger at the lawyer. When I went in the conference room, I could actually feel the tension. The division chemical officer related the problem succinctly. He said the regulation, based upon the combat exclusion rule, stated female chemical and engineering officers could be attached to combat units as platoon leaders for training purposes only. The women could not deploy with the units if they went into combat.

We had a number of very successful female platoon leaders serving in both the chemical and engineering companies. At the time, the rule was that women could not serve below brigade staff level, which is why the regulation was written the way it was. The regulation stated the women would have to be pulled from their position when deployed. To exacerbate the situation, there were no male lieutenants to replace the female officers until ROTC graduated in the spring. What that meant was we would be sending these platoons into what we believed was a combat chemical environment without any officer leadership. We knew we had to do a number of river crossings and breaching operations and we would now have engineering platoons without officer leadership.

The division commander, General Odierno, was beyond furious. After a bit of back and forth, I informed him that it is not the lawyer, it is the law. He summarized that the rule resulted in the undeniable conclusion that, somewhere, there was a belief that no officer leadership was better than female officer leadership. General Odierno believed that female officer leadership was every bit as good as male officer leadership. I advised General Odierno to notify higher headquarters of his opinion and to let them know he was taking his platoon leaders. General Odierno, a man who judged every person by their capability, deployed with his female officers leading their platoons. He forced change through necessity. Sometimes change is necessary because the alternative is just plain stupid.

When I deployed, no one on the division staff cared about my gender. They only cared that I was good at my job and that my team was competent and capable. Like every judge advocate, I was pulled into meetings that had nothing to do with law. I was there because I was valued for my analytical skills, creative ideas, problem solving, and common sense. Like



many women and female Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, we were valued members of the team because of our capabilities. I felt as if we had achieved parity.

Then, the summer came, and one by one the female chemical and engineering leaders were replaced by men, even if they had not finished their platoon time. General Odierno had me sit down with each one of those female leaders who had excelled and explain to them the combat exclusion rule to make sure they understood the rule had nothing to do with their ability, performance, or capability. It was a reminder that parity was not actually achieved, and I would need to continue to be vigilant and follow my parents' advice. If I wanted to be considered equal, I needed to continue to work as hard as I could and be my very best every single day. I did that as a lieutenant colonel and as a colonel. I worked extraordinarily hard, always gave my best, and never forgot that they were watching.

#### Selection as The Judge Advocate General

A number of years later, I was selected and notified I was going to be The 39th Judge Advocate General. Again, I heard rumblings that the naysayers commented I was only selected because I was a woman. I laid in bed for three nights, vacillating between sheer terror that I was going to fail as TJAG and raw anger that folks would think I did not deserve the selection regardless of my gender. I kept thinking that I did not succeed because I was a woman; I succeeded in spite of being a woman. I did not take the place of someone else; I earned my place. And, as always, my husband grounded me with good counsel. He reminded me to ignore the naysayers and approach this job as I have approached every other job in my career. At my promotion, I told the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Odierno, that I would work as hard as I always had, and I would give my best every single day.

While I was TJAG, we dealt with some tough issues and some pretty contentious ones, like the Army downsizing, sexual assault, government shut down, sequester, and operational and international law issues in combat zones. The Army staff did not always agree on every issue, but we implemented the Army vision because that was our responsibility. However, there was one issue we all agreed on. That was eliminating the combat exclusion rule and allowing women to attend Ranger training. I remember someone saying in the room women are already serving in combat roles. General Dempsey really hit this home when he was asked about this question. He told the story of when he was the 1st Armored Division Commanding General in Iraq. He jumped into his gun truck,

tapped the gunner on the leg and said, “Who are you?” The person yelled from the gun turret, “My name is Amanda.” The Division Commander was being protected in his truck during that tour by Amanda.

Women were already serving in combat units. They were already walking patrols. They were manning the guns in division commanders’ turrets. They were also wounded and killed in combat. As with those chemical and engineering platoon leaders, it was another case of change being necessary because the alternative was just plain stupid. There were vocal opponents to the change, but I think it was important to note the naysayers were not senior leaders in the active Army. Some of the opponents felt allowing women to serve without restrictions would somehow deny positions to men. It seemed they also believed women could not earn these positions under the same standards as men. Another group seemed to believe allowing women in these positions would somehow denigrate a unit or branch’s elite status.

All of these naysayers were particularly vocal about Ranger School. Even when the male counterparts of the first female Ranger School graduates publicly stated the women completed every task to the exact same standard or better, they refused to believe it. They just could not simply accept the reality that a woman could earn a Ranger tab. I came to believe there were some men who thought their Ranger tab was worth less because they saw a woman wearing the same tab. Why would a woman accomplishing the exact same thing as a man mean that a man accomplishing that task was worth less? I never truly understood. Unless there are those who believe women can never stand as equals beside them, even if they do the same job. That proposition is not one I am willing to accept.

The most troubling to me were the folks who—I think—believed having women in combat units would somehow make those fighting forces less capable. The women serving in those positions would be required to assess and succeed at the same training as the men. That means they would have demonstrated they were equally capable at the same required tasks as the men. So, how would that make units less capable? I cannot help but remember the women leaders in the chemical and engineering platoons. Those women were assigned to lead those platoons in training, and we train as we fight. Why would we doubt those women would be just as successful in the fight as they were in training? Particularly if their training is the exact same as the men’s?

I also believe some were reluctant to change their behavior. I recall addressing a group of non-JAG warrant officers when a chief expressed complete and genuine frustration about the possibility he would have to modify his behavior and speech around women. It was kind of a “boys will

be boys” sort of comment. I simply replied, “You are not a boy anymore. You are an officer and a gentleman. We expect you to act as a gentleman. And as a leader, we expect you to modify your behavior to make a cohesive team and bring out the best in every team member. It does not matter if there is a woman in your formation. The task is the same.”

As you know, that is because the Army and the military is a team of teams. And, as a successful team, you need to modify your behavior in order to build bonds and bring out the best in every single member of your team. Strong teams do not objectify. Strong teams do not insult. And strong teams do not degrade each other. Because that tears at the bonds. Instead, strong teams unite and draw out the best in each other, in their capabilities, attributes, and strengths. They work together collectively and push each other to get better. Strong teams are built from each of us being the best people we can be. Women do not change that dynamic. Even in my first office, where my supervisors failed to cultivate that kind of office and that type of cohesive team, we, as captains, united together and we created a strong team that buttressed against the sexual harassment we faced.

In the end, the Department of Defense eliminated the combat exclusion policy even though all members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not support it. General Odierno was a strong and vocal supporter of the change. We were also very lucky to have General Dempsey as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Both men served in combat with female Soldiers. Both of them respected their capability. And both of them knew those women belonged there. I look back at every major juncture of change in my career, and there stood a strong leader who valued people for their abilities. They had the courage to place the right people in the right jobs in order to force change.

### Conclusion

Before I joined the Army, they, whoever “they” were, “sent me anyway,” and I hope I did not let them down. I did my best. When I was a captain, General Huffman ensured capable leaders who happened to be women were not left out of positions during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He ensured they were on the battle roster because they earned that spot. When I was a major, Colonel Carey sent down his best NCO to an infantry brigade, knowing she would excel and change the minds of the naysayers. She did change their mind because she was his best and just happened to be a woman. When I was a lieutenant colonel, General Odierno took exceedingly capable female leaders with him to Iraq, in the

positions they had trained for, so their platoons had the leadership they deserved. On the Army staff, when the key domino was teed up and ready to fall, I saw General Odierno and the Army leadership throughout the formation push back against the naysayer noise and the distraction and do what was right for the female Soldiers who deserved it. Those female Soldiers deserved to be treated as full members of the team with full access to success. In each of these pivotal moments, it was leaders who forced the change, and it was the women who made it possible.

I would be remiss without a word of concern about backsliding. When my optimist side tries to make a Pollyanna out of me, I caution myself with a memory of the time when I was the SJA at the 4th Infantry Division. I accompanied General Odierno to a tense meeting with an Iranian dissident group. They were located in Iraq, and for those of you who have been there, they were the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq. Our mission was to have them consolidate both their forces and their arms. The commander of that force, along with all the brigade commanders, sat across the table from us. Each and every one of them was a woman. Every leader in that fighting force was a woman. After two days of sitting across from them in a tug of war of words, they finally agreed to our demands. I then pushed a document across the table to the commander for her signature. She looked me in the eyes, and she pushed that document to her left to the only male sitting on that side of the table. Then, she caught my gaze and said, "I cannot sign a legal document in my own country. Only a man can sign it. That is why I fight. I fight for my equality and my freedom."

I tell you that story because I know those naysayers are still out there. I know they are still looking for opportunities to poke, to prod, and to push back against progress. I still hear comments about the feminization of the military. I still hear comments about how we are weak or weaker because we believe in supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. You in the Graduate Course, you as leaders, all of us cannot let the naysayers distract us. We have a responsibility to push back on them. Instead, we must continue to push forward and force change. They used the same argument when we tried to integrate race in our service. They used the same argument when we tried to eliminate "don't ask, don't tell." They tried the same argument throughout my career as I watched great leaders force change and people rise to the occasion when they were positioned to succeed. It was because of great leaders that change occurred.

What I remind you as you head back to the field after graduation is that you have the power to force change and you do it through your individual actions. The naysayers fail to recognize that the strength of our Army comes from the combined strength of each and every single one of you. You as leaders, ensure that every member of your team has the ability

to reach their greatest potential. Your responsibility is to make sure that every single one of them has a chance to be their best and the opportunity to reach their full potential. They deserve that as an American Soldier, Sailor, Marine, Airman, Coast Guardsmen, and Guardian. To achieve their full capability and their full potential is a promise that is embedded in the American dream. That is the American dream my parents had for me.

It is now your responsibility as leaders to make sure that each person you lead has that opportunity. Be all you can be. Make sure every person you have the privilege to lead has the ability to be all they can be. I am an American Soldier for life. Thank you.