

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, on the occasion of the United States Military Academy 1980 Thayer Award, West Point, New York, September 11, 1980)

I am greatly honored to receive the Sylvanus Thayer Award here at the United States Military Academy today. Our two institutions have had a long and cordial relationship since that famous game in 1913 when a small Midwestern university, playing here for the first time, unexpectedly beat the Army powerhouse by the strategem of using a legitimate play that, up to then, was rarely used, the forward pass. The obscure Notre Dame player, a Norwegian immigrant, who received the first passes from the quarterback, Gus Dorais, was named Knute Rockne. That day a new kind of game was inaugurated here and the two teams involved are still playing, meeting each other for the 44th time on October 18. I assume that there will be some more forward passes. (It was also in a game with Army that the Four Horsemen were born.)

Our two institutions have much more in common than that yearly meeting on the gridiron. Curiously, we are both named in connection with a river, you West Point on the Hudson River; we South Bend on the St. Joseph River. Beyond that geographical similarity, there is a far deeper point of coincidence between West Point and Notre Dame. Your motto is Duty, Honor, and Country. Ours is God, Country, and Notre Dame. You will note that the word we share in common is country. That is to say that we are both, as institutions, unabashedly patriotic. Both our founders took seriously the concept of devotion to country,

the patria, the fatherland. I am sure that Sylvanus Thayer would approve of my addressing the Corps on this subject today, especially since it gives a special character both to our institutions and our graduates.

From the outset, one should admit that there has been spoken and written a lot of nonsense on the subject of patriotism, "My country, right or wrong," being the most noteworthy.

Patriotism is a dynamic quality attaching us not only to our country as it has been -- our great national traditions -- or as our country presently is -- the land of the free and the home of the brave. In addition, patriotism dedicates us to our country's future -- what it might yet become, in fulfilling its best aspirations and the promise of our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our Bill of Rights as evidenced in those first ten amendments and the sixteen that have been added since then.

If all this is true, then they are the most patriotic who deeply understand the history of our country, how and why it came to be, what it aimed to become -- in the words of the Mayflower Compact, a light to the nations. There is nothing static about this light. Surely it shone more brightly, more in keeping with our original dream, after Lincoln's courageous Emancipation Proclamation. Surely then it was more apparent than when the noble words were written, that we believe that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The light shone ever more brightly each time that we defended freedom and human rights, here and abroad. That was patriotism -- love of country and all it stands for -- at its best.

Patriotism is, however, not merely military, even though the military have most often given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives to keep liberty's light alive and shining brightly. They were also patriotic who worked peacefully, like Martin Luther King, to see enacted into law a new enlargement of freedom for all Americans, as happened with the passage of the great Civil Rights legislation of 1964, 1965, and 1968.

Both West Point and Notre Dame are engaged in producing officers -- you more than we, but we also produce Naval and Air Force officers, as well as Army. All of you will also be called, by Act of Congress, gentlemen, and I am sure some gentlewomen. Is this a great contradiction that an officer, a leader and a wielder of military might, is also in the same breath called a gentle man or a gentle woman?

No, I think not, and the reason is not unrelated to patriotism, the great virtue that so characterizes what one conceives an officer to be in our American tradition.

The opposite would be a savage man or woman, and the history of armies has seen many of these -- Genghis Khan and Hitler to mention two of the most savage. What is really at issue here is the use of power. Much is written and discussed about power in

America today. Do we have too much or too little? Are we less strong or stronger than the opposition? No one in his right mind wants a weak America, but a strong America -- in and of itself in terms of power -- is not the ultimate question that should concern us. The ultimate and most important question regards the use of power. Officers who are deeply patriotic want to see power used to forward the purposes for which this country was founded, to sustain and enlarge freedom, for ourselves and others, to be a positive force for good in a world full of evil and violence, in a word, a force for peace.

This is an ideal, a patriotic ideal to which every young man and woman in the Corps can wholeheartedly dedicate himself or herself. It is something to be proud of, not to apologize for.

During the student revolution of the late sixties and early seventies, many prominent universities in this land were eliminating the R.O.T.C. units on their campuses, because of an anti-military sentiment engendered by the Vietnam War. We at Notre Dame had a campus-wide convocation of faculty and students to discuss the matter. My main point in the discussion was to emphasize the true function of the military in our history, from the Constitution forward, and to emphasize that while all are free to criticize it, there are some who wanted to join it, as a high expression of patriotism properly understood. Freedom cuts both ways. If some are free to yell, "Hell no, I won't go," others are free to say, "I will; I want to serve my country in a special way, with duty, honor, and, especially, patriotism."

When the discussion was ended, 86% voted to keep the three R.O.T.C. units. Two of them are the largest in the country today and that is not unrelated to God, Country, and Notre Dame. It isn't a matter of going or not going, but of going for what and why. That is a moral, rational, and even a humane decision. Military forces are at their worst when led by those who are brutal, irrational, and, ultimately, unpatriotic, loving power for the sake of power, not duty, honor, or country.

Make no mistake about it, true patriotism, especially in the military, requires great inner spiritual strength and enlightened leadership. It is no excuse to simply say, "The civilians give the orders, we just obey them. Those who did that in World War II we hung after the judgment at Nuremberg. If the United States wanted automatons for officers, there would be no need to prepare them at such honorable places as West Point and Notre Dame. A country as powerful as ours needs the most intelligent, dedicated, and patriotic kind of military leadership from top to bottom, from Second Lieutenants to four-star Generals, precisely because power carries with it an enormous temptation to abuse, or to use it badly and, secondly, we need great officers because we are the kind of country that we are, dedicated to liberty and freedom, to law and civil order, to preserving the peace rather than waging unnecessary war. Duty means something very demanding to our officers, young and old, precisely because they do cherish honor, and they do honor all that America stands for, even at the cost of their lives.

I heard a great intellectual say recently that the Communists really understand power and that we in America do not. They have used power consistently and persistently to achieve their aims and are successful. We in America are not, he said.

My answer was simple, and possibly simplistic, but I noted that despite all of our geopolitic mistakes, we must be doing something right, since they have to build fences to keep people in and we have to build fences to keep people out. Of the millions of the refugees in the world today, how many are standing in line to get a visa for the Soviet Union?

I am sure that across the decades, Sylvanus Thayer would want me to remind you today that you are an important link in a proud tradition. You will be a strong link if you are proud of what is best in America, proud to be a vital part of the leadership required to sustain and enlarge what is best and even to make it better. Never fear power, but be careful, intelligent, creative, and humane in using it well, beginning with those few you will command at first, on to those many some of you will command some future day. Remember always that no one is a good or great leader without a deep and lifelong commitment to both duty and honor, and, finally, be proud not only of your country as it is, but engage through your patriotic profession to make it ever better, ever greater, a strong light in the surrounding darkness of a world where power is more often abused than used for the good of human kind.

Sylvanus Thayer was a good officer who cherished his country and your service. I am proud to receive from you a medal bearing his name.