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A PREMIUM ON GOOD JUDGMENT

Richard N. Haass

This is an institution with a great tradition, and I am honored to have been asked to address you on this day—an honor made all the greater given the distinguished individuals who preceded me in years past.

I will be characteristically blunt: you are departing the War College at a time of considerable international turmoil. Ours is a time of war, or to be more precise, wars—a global war on terrorism, a war in Afghanistan, and a war in Iraq, not to mention a conflict in Colombia and conflicts in several countries in Africa. Those who predicted that the world after the end of the Cold War would be tranquil were wrong, or at least premature. One result is that military force, particularly American military force, remains relevant, and then some.

But the role of military force is hardly obvious. As we have seen, advantage on traditional battlefields does not equate to victory. To the contrary, one lesson many individuals seem to have learned of late is that the one place not to challenge the United States is on traditional battlefields, where modern conventional forces easily prevail. Instead, what we are seeing, what we can expect to see, is a resort to nontraditional battlefields ranging from train stations to shopping malls, and the use of nontraditional tactics and weapons—above all, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Coping with such nontraditional challenges will be difficult. I refer here not simply to technical challenges but also to the intellectual. Take the U.S. decision to go to war against Iraq. The traditional phase of battle proved relatively one-sided, the subsequent phase anything but. Clearly, preemptive—or more accurately, preventive—strikes are one thing, preemptive or preventive wars quite another.

Several months ago I first noted publicly that Iraq was a war of choice, not a war of necessity. My purpose today is not to debate this assertion; much less is it to take sides as to the correctness of the choice. I also do not intend to debate whether the previous President Bush was right to go to war to liberate Kuwait—or whether he was right to stop the war when he did and not to march on to Baghdad.

Or consider for a moment some of the decisions confronting other governments. There is a heated debate in Israel over whether it should disengage unilaterally from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. Afghanistan's leaders have to decide whether, and if so, how, to challenge warlords; Colombia's government must tackle the difficult issue of what strategy to employ vis-à-vis the several insurgencies active in that country.

Again, my intention here is not to attempt to answer these or similarly complex questions, any one of which could provide the basis for a commencement address on its own. Rather, I want to raise the issue that is implicit in the debates that surround all these questions—an issue that is explicit, I would think, in the course of study you have just completed. How do you discover the wisdom when confronted with a range of difficult alternatives? How do you exercise good judgment?

This is important, for the decision to go to war against Iraq will surely not be the only such decision in the course of your lives and careers. I would predict that each and every person leaving the Naval War College today will be asked on several occasions to make difficult choices, to offer analysis and advice, to make decisions, on matters of war and peace. Some of the situations may resemble Iraq, in the sense that the question at hand will be whether to attack a country believed to be developing weapons of mass destruction. Other situations may more closely resemble Bosnia or Kosovo, in which case the question will be what to do in the face of ethnic cleansing or genocide. Still others of you will face questions more pertinent to the particular circumstances of your assignment or country, or both.

What is certain, though, is that each and every one of you will be confronted repeatedly by complex choices for which there is no obvious right decision. What this means is that there is a premium on demonstrating good judgment.

I know that many of you after graduating here will be returning to your own countries. Let me thus hasten to add that there is nothing uniquely American about what I am saying here today. It is not simply the obvious point, that Americans have no monopoly on good judgment, but also that Americans have no monopoly on the need for it.

First things first. What constitutes good judgment? I would define it as the ability to assess a situation as accurately and as objectively as possible, and to

prescribe a response that is feasible and advances one's interests at the lowest possible level of costs, be they human, financial, or political.

Sometimes you will be asked to provide good judgment; on other occasions, you will be on the receiving end of someone else's judgment, and your challenge will be to determine whether it is in fact good. Let me suggest that this may be more difficult than it sounds; unlike pornography, you do not always recognize good judgment—or bad judgment, for that matter—when you see it. Exercising good judgment is never easy, but it can be particularly difficult when the issue is foreign policy and national security. Invariably there is a matter of secrecy; you rarely know everything, and even knowing what it is that you don't know can prove elusive. Language, physical distance, culture—all contribute to the difficulties.

There is an additional factor that contributes to the challenge of exercising good judgment. Systems analysis may tell you how many submarines or battle-ships or aircraft carriers to buy, but it will not tell you whether and how to use them. Equations do not exist for such inherently subjective assessments, which are at the core of foreign policy and national security.

So, how does one exercise good judgment? Nothing is more fundamental than good, old-fashioned assessment of likely costs and benefits inherent in a possible course of action. One somehow doubts that those who predicted the benefits of interrogation at the Abu Ghraib prison did a careful evaluation of the likely costs. Any calculation of costs must also embrace opportunity costs, what you must give up doing because of what you are doing. Resources dedicated to one purpose can rarely be made immediately available to another.

But an absolute assessment of the costs and benefits of a proposed course of action is not enough. You must be equally rigorous about the likely consequences of alternatives. It is fairly easy to find fault with just about any option; it is not so easy to weigh the relative strengths and weaknesses of multiple options.

It is essential that one option always be inaction. "Don't just do something, stand there" can, on occasion, be sage advice. On other occasions, such as when the world sat on its collective hands as genocide overwhelmed Rwanda in 1994, doing nothing can be the worst advice. The problem is figuring out what sort of occasion you are presented with.

In considering costs and benefits, it is important to discriminate carefully between what is known and what is believed. We have had a powerful example of just this recently, when many people, including your commencement speaker today, concluded that Saddam Hussein's Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons when, it appears, it did not.

Groupthink is a real risk in this regard. There is an inevitable tendency for people who work together and who must continue to work together to begin to

think alike. Assumptions have a way of sneaking into analysis. That is not necessarily bad, but it can be, if the assumptions go unchallenged or are confused with facts. The fact that there was not more response to indications prior to 9/11 of possible terrorist attacks against the United States in part reflects a widely held view at the time about the nature of the terrorist threat.

I also find it useful to ask what it would take to change your conclusion. Look at the building blocks of the argument and identify what is the most critical stone in the foundation. If something should happen to that item, it is a signal to make sure that your original determination is still valid.

It is always a good idea to consider lessons from history that could prove relevant. I expect that you are all familiar with George Santayana's dictum that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. But I recommend that you do not ignore my corollary: Make sure the history is relevant. Not every diplomatic compromise constitutes another Munich; not every military undertaking that encounters difficulty is another Vietnam.

Be careful about changing course. This is not an argument against changing your mind sometime after you first decide. Rather, I am only suggesting that you do so carefully. Midcourse corrections should be subject to scrutiny no less rigorous than that applied to original choices.

The importance of judging correctly goes up with the stakes. One problem is that stakes tend to be at their highest amidst crises, and crises tend to be precisely those times when you are most pressed by events and have less ability to think—not to mention sleep—than is normally the case. Here, as elsewhere in life, you need to struggle to make sure the urgent does not crowd out the important. You can guard against some of these risks by turning to other people. If you have the chance, work hard to create an environment in which those who challenge orthodoxy are rewarded, not penalized. Establish competing centers of thought; the more important it is that you get something right, the more you can afford to spend on making sure that you do.

One last point. On occasion, your judgment will clash with that of others. The "other" can be a superior, a subordinate, or a colleague, a civilian, or someone else in uniform. If experience is any guide, this can be difficult or worse when the disagreement is with someone who happens to be your superior. As military professionals, you are well versed in the most familiar dimension of loyalty, that of accepting civilian authority, of recognizing rank and saluting once a decision is made and an order given. But it is no less important to fulfill the second dimension of loyalty, speaking truth to power.

You may be thinking that all this is obvious, but as one who has spent the bulk of his career in Washington, I would suggest otherwise. Indeed, Washington is a town where too often people shy away from telling people what they need to

hear, falling back on what they want to hear. Or they just refuse to speak up. Acts of omission can be no less significant than acts of commission.

Let me just say that I have few regrets in my professional life, but what few I do possess stem mostly from the things I did not say—or didn't say loud enough and often enough—and from the things I did not do. Once you are confident of your judgment, share it. If you question an assumption, challenge it. If you are uncomfortable with a decision, voice it. I can think of no better ways for you to serve your conscience and your country.

