

**GENERAL J. H. BINFORD PEAY, III
SUPERINTENDENT**

**Remarks at the Academic Convocation
6 September 2017
Cameron Hall**

Members of the Academic Board; Faculty and Staff; members of the Corps of Cadets; Ladies and Gentlemen.

Welcome to this morning's Convocation marking the opening of the 2017-2018 academic year. We are honored to have with us Mr. Robert Warren "Bob" Woodruff, today's Convocation speaker, whom I have the pleasure of introducing to you in a few moments.

It also gives me great pleasure this morning to recognize the cadets who are seated to your front. They are Cadets Distinguished in Academic Merit, and I ask you to join me in expressing our congratulations to them on their accomplishments. [*Lead Applause*]

To your front (also) are the Virginia Military Institute's Faculty, who serve as intellectual examples to our cadets. They teach and mentor you over the course of your cadetship...and, in many cases, a lifetime relationship develops. They probably are the most focused "teacher-student mentors" of any college faculty in the nation. Let's give them our applause in appreciation for their work and dedication.

Once again, we are gathered to acknowledge and to celebrate the central mission of the Institute, which is to produce educated, informed young men and women who have the knowledge, skills, fitness and character to be useful citizens for all professions..., and ready, if qualified, to serve as citizen-soldiers. I've said it before, but it remains true: The means by which we seek to accomplish this mission have changed over the course of the Institute's nearly 178 years, but the mission remains the same. In fact, the words of founder J. T. L. Preston, which are affixed to the parapet wall and memorized by all cadets, are as valid today as they were when he wrote them in 1837 as a summary of his "argument" for the founding of the Institute.

One proof of the success of our mission can be measured in the quality and success of our graduates, as well as the opinions of others, especially those who employ them upon graduation. And in that regard, VMI stands out as an impressively successful and highly regarded institution of higher education, in

the state and across the nation with 99% having employment in many of the nation's best corporations and professions. One needs only to look at traditional print or electronic media, or the many new social media sites to see that VMI is consistently rated "well up" in the upper quartile of all national colleges – public and private in *Princeton Review*, *Forbes*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Money Magazine*, to mention a few.

Leadership education and training have also always been an integral part of the mission of VMI. That historic emphasis has been formally expanded to include an ethical component. Conferences, lectures, seminars, and discussion sessions at the Center for Leadership and Ethics, have provided cadets, faculty and associated educational institutions and our communities with knowledge and experiences that have enhanced the instruction in the classroom, and brought well-deserved attention to the VMI academic program. Among the several goals of the VMI leadership program are civility, mutual respect, and encouraging cadets to be open-minded to different viewpoints, while developing informed opinions of their own. The annual Leadership Conference this year has much of this as its objective. In these times...these goals are particularly relevant and important.

Predicting the future, especially with any certainty, is always problematic and speculative. Back in 1967, for example, the prestigious *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* published a volume titled "Toward the Year 2000: Work in Progress." Forty-one scholars, politicians, futurists, and other eminent men and women contributed chapters. One of the most striking things about the volume is the near absence of any discussion of the role of computers. Emphasis was placed, instead, on the expansion of television, Cable TV, and telephones. The only hint of what might come was a statement..., one brief item in a long list of items..., that telephones may someday be small enough to fit into one's pocket, and that home computers may "run" the household and communicate with the outside world. And this was 1967! None of these essays were intended as a prediction, but it is interesting to read how very thoughtful men and women tended to see the future, in the year 2000, a date which is now 17 years old.

With the landslide of information now available to anyone with a smart phone, there has arisen a "serious need" for flexibility in thinking about the world, for critical thinking, and for critical evaluation of what we experience every day.

Our academic departments, which emphasize in their teaching the foundational knowledge of science, technology, mathematics, and the liberal arts – as appropriate for an undergraduate institution of higher education -- will

continue to evolve – methodically, carefully, and thoughtfully as areas of knowledge evolve and as the needs of society evolve. Where they may go from now cannot be predicted with certainty. Beyond teaching the basic knowledge of their fields, however, I am confident that our faculty, coaches, and staff will increase their emphasis on the need to develop in cadets the skills and tools of critical thinking -- the ability to analyze and evaluate information, large data and the issues. One side of education is “acquiring” knowledge; the other side is “thinking clearly and rationally”.

Ironically, although life at VMI is **rules-based**, critical thinking can also make it possible to step away from established rules and accepted procedures -- “thinking out of the box,” as they say. The critical mind is often the creative mind. Critical thinking can result in seeing problems in a new light or in a new context...and the two approaches – critical and creative -- are not at odds. The future graduate needs always to ask: “Do I fully and clearly understand what is presented to me? Is there another and better way?” And, these questions are particularly important in this future complex world in which computerized machines are programmed to think intelligently, where creativity occurs in a virtual realm, and artificial intelligence and robotics, among other developments, play major roles in the way we fight, major roles in the way we learn, and major roles in the way we resolve problems to make a better world. Scientists will be challenged ethically as they seek to extend the limits of bio-engineering. Much of this will bring a list of dangers. History and English and the Arts will be called on for balance and reasoning.

I firmly believe that critical thinking is a tool...it is a skill...for a lifetime and with the very best of knowledge in the basics will enable our cadets and graduates to navigate the future with confidence and authority and...importantly...both are required characteristics and skills of good leaders. This skill, in many ways, is timeless and is anchored by a nuanced set of ethical instincts.

Now it is my great pleasure to introduce this morning’s speaker.

There are many ways to enter combat. One is armed with weapons, while another is to be armed with a camera, a notepad and a pencil. In either case, equal danger exists, as our speaker today found in Iraq.

On 29 January 2006, ABC News Anchor Bob Woodruff was working on a story near Baghdad when the vehicle in which he and his cameraman were riding was destroyed by a roadside bomb. Grievously wounded, Mr. Woodruff would spend the next 13 months recovering before returning to reporting. And, as we all watched his recovery...what a wonderful example we witnessed of a

family's loyalty, perseverance, personal discipline, and his courage and inner strength.

He joined ABC News in 1996 and has covered major stories throughout the country and around the world for the network. He was named co-anchor of ABC World News Tonight in December 2005 to replace Peter Jennings who died of lung cancer. Since returning to the air after his wounding, he has reported from around the globe – North Korea, Syria and Jordan, and Sudan.

Prior to his injury, he was among the first Western reporters into Pakistan after the September 11 attacks, and was one of ABC's lead foreign correspondents during the war in Afghanistan, reporting from Kabul and Kandahar on the fall of the Taliban. For his reporting, he was recognized with the "Alfred I. DuPont Award" and the "George Foster Peabody Award," the two highest honors in broadcast journalism.

After his recovery, Mr. Woodruff's family established the "Bob Woodruff Foundation," a New York-based non-profit that has raised more than \$30 million to help our injured post-9/11 service members and their families. In 2014, he was awarded the Department of the Army's "Outstanding Civilian Service Award," for substantial contributions to the U.S. Army community.

Mr. Woodruff has a law degree from the University of Michigan Law School and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Colgate University.

Please join me with a warm Institute welcome for our convocation speaker....Mr. Woodruff.