

“ANOTHER TYPE OF WARFARE”

JFK's Address to the West Point Class of 1962

by Jared M. Tracy

Final photo of JFK at USMA.



On 6 June 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy (JFK) gave the commencement address at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York. Just nine months earlier, on 12 October 1961, JFK had visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he observed Special Warfare demonstrations near McKellar's Pond by Special Forces (SF) soldiers wearing their newly sanctioned green berets.¹ This visit was followed by a letter from the White House to the Army in April 1962, in which JFK wrote, “The green beret’ is . . . a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom.”² The President’s speech to the West Point Class of 1962 reiterated his view that there were more suitable ways to addressing Communist-inspired “wars

JFK meets Brigadier General William P. Yarborough, Commanding General, U.S. Army Special Warfare Center, during his visit to Fort Bragg, NC, in October 1961.





TOP LEFT: JFK lands on The Plain for his participation in West Point graduation exercises, 6 June 1962. **TOP MIDDLE:** Surrounded by the USMA Color Guard (rear), the Secretary of the Army, Elvis J. Stahr, Jr. (left front), and various senior leaders, JFK (center front) receives honors from the USMA band and a 21-gun. Facing the President in the foreground of the photo is the honor guard. **TOP RIGHT:** After the rendering of honors, the President reviews the honor guard on The Plain. **MIDDLE LEFT:** JFK proceeds from the honor guard area to meet other senior military leaders on The Plain. At the far right of the photo are retired MG Henry Clay Hodges, Jr., West Point Class of 1881, and three cadets who Kennedy had nominated to the Academy when he was a U.S. Senator: Peter J. Oldfield, David G. Binney, and Kevin G. Renaghan. **MIDDLE:** JFK speaks with MG (ret.) Hodges (in wheelchair) just before greeting his past USMA nominees, Cadets Oldfield, Binney, and Renaghan. Westmoreland is to Hodges' immediate right. **BOTTOM LEFT:** JFK and Westmoreland in the presidential limo for the short trip to Gillis Field House for the graduation ceremony. All images are credited to the JFK Presidential Library and Museum.

of national liberation” than with large-scale conventional warfare or nuclear retaliation. The U.S. Army’s leading unconventional warfare experts, Special Forces, were central to his security strategy.

On Wednesday morning, 6 June 1962, on the anniversary of the 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy (D-Day), the President landed aboard a Sikorsky S-61 helicopter onto The Plain (parade ground) at West Point. Followed by his Military Aide, General (GEN) Chester V. Clifton, Kennedy walked down the stairs onto the field and stood for a 21-gun salute and honors by the USMA Band. There, he was joined by Color Guard cadets; the Secretary of the Army, Elvis J. Stahr, Jr.; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, GEN Lyman L. Lemnitzer; Chief of Staff of the United States Army, GEN George H. Decker; and Superintendent of the USMA and future senior commander in Vietnam, Major General (MG) William C. Westmoreland.³

Accompanied by Westmoreland and escorted by honor guard commander, Cadet Captain Paul J. Kirkegaard, JFK proceeded to review the honor guard; greet other military leaders; pay his respects to the elderly MG (retired) Henry Clay Hodges, Jr., West Point Class of 1881; and meet three cadets, Peter J. Oldfield, David G. Binney, and Kevin G. Renaghan, whom he had nominated to the Academy during his time as a U.S. Senator. Kennedy and West-



moreland then loaded into the back seat of the presidential Lincoln Continental convertible to make the half-mile trip to Gillis Field House, where the graduation ceremony was to take place.⁴

The presidential entourage proceeded to the packed arena, and commencement was soon underway. Following the invocation by Chaplain Theodore C. Speers and MG Westmoreland's introductory remarks, the Combined Chapel Choirs sang the West Point hymn, "The Corps." The Superintendent then returned to the microphone to introduce the President as the keynote speaker.⁵ Originally drafted by White House Special Counsel and speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, and with handwritten edits by JFK himself, the [speech](#) began at 10:01 am and lasted just over seventeen minutes.⁶ His overarching

TOP LEFT & RIGHT: Views inside Gillis Field House for the graduation ceremony on 6 June 1962. **BOTTOM LEFT:** During the graduation ceremony, Superintendent MG Westmoreland addressed the graduates, introduced the President as the guest speaker, called up Cadet George W. Kirschenbauer to present JFK with the class gift, and administered the oath of office to graduates. All images are credited to the JFK Presidential Library and Museum.

message was that the world was constantly changing; that some of the challenges facing the nation had historic precedents, while others were entirely unique; and that, as part of the larger profession of arms, the graduates must be prepared, adaptable, and constantly learning in order to meet them.

The highlight for U.S. Army Special Warfare, and SF in particular, came at about seven minutes into his remarks. According to the Commander-in-Chief:

*To cite one final example of the range of responsibilities that will fall upon you; **you may hold a position of command with our special forces, forces which are too unconventional to be called conventional, forces which are growing in number and importance** and significance, for we now know that it is wholly misleading to call this the “nuclear age,” or to say that our security rests only on the doctrine of massive retaliation. Korea has not been the only battleground since the end of the Second World War. Men have fought and died in Malaya, in Greece, in the Philippines, in Algeria, and Cuba and Cyprus, and almost continuously on the Indo-Chinese peninsula. No nuclear weapons have been fired. No massive nuclear retaliation has been considered appropriate. This is **another type of warfare, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins**, war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It is a form of warfare uniquely adapted to what has been strangely called “wars of liberation,” to undermine the efforts of new and poor countries to maintain the freedom that they have finally achieved. It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kinds of challeng-*

TOP: Different view of President Kennedy addressing the West Point Class of 1962.
BOTTOM: Sorensen’s draft of the USMA speech (left) and the President’s marked-up read copy (right).



(images credit: JFK Presidential Library and Museum)

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To cite one final example of the range of military responsibilities: you may hold a position of command with our Special Forces -- forces which are too unconventional to be called conventional -- forces which are now growing in number and importance. For we now know ^{that} it is wholly misleading to call this “the nuclear age” or to say that our security rests on our capacity for “massive retaliation”. Korea has not been the only battleground since the close of the Second World War -- men have also fought and died in Malaya, in Greece, in the Philippines, in Algeria and Cuba and Cyprus, and almost continuously on the Indo-Chinese peninsula. No nuclear weapons have been fired -- no massive ^{nuclear} retaliation ~~has been considered appropriate~~. This is another type of warfare -- new in its intensity, ancient in its origin -- war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, and assassins -- war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression -- seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.

It is a form of warfare uniquely adapted to what Mr. Khrushchev calls “wars of liberation”, to undermining the efforts of the newer and poorer countries to achieve both progress ^{and} freedom. It preys on economic unrest and ethnic distrust. It requires, in those situations where we must counter it if freedom is to be saved, a wholly new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a wholly new and different kind of military leadership and training.

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the service to our country which is rendered, or the pain of the casualties which are suffered.

To cite one final example of the range of military responsibilities: you may hold a position of command with our Special Forces -- forces which are too unconventional to be called conventional -- forces which are now growing in number and importance. For we now know that it is wholly misleading to call this “the nuclear age” or to say that our security rests ^{only} on our capacity for “massive retaliation.” Korea has not been the only battleground since the close of the Second World War -- men have also fought and died in Malaya,

(images credit: JFK Presidential Library and Museum)



Different view of President Kennedy addressing the West Point Class of 1962

es that will be before us in the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.

But I have spoken thus far only of the military challenges which your education must prepare you for. The nonmilitary problems which you will face will also be most demanding, diplomatic, political, and economic. In the years ahead, some of you will serve as advisers to foreign aid missions or even to foreign governments. Some will negotiate terms of a cease-fire with broad political as well as military ramifications. Some of you will

go to the far corners of the earth, and to the far reaches of space. Some of you will sit in the highest councils of the Pentagon. Others will hold delicate command posts which are international in character. Still others will advise on plans to abolish arms instead of using them to abolish others. Whatever your position, the scope of your decisions will not be confined to the traditional tenets of military competence and training.

You will need to know and understand not only the foreign policy of the United States but the foreign policy of all countries scattered around the world who 20 years ago were the most

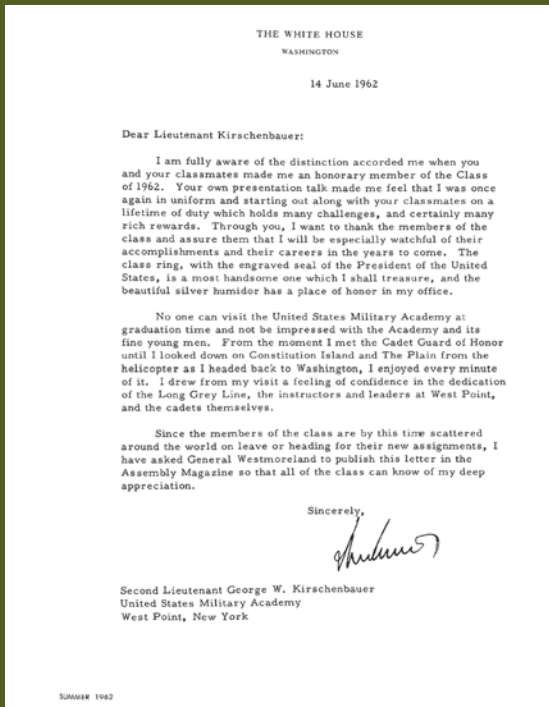
distant names to us. You will need to give orders in different tongues and read maps by different systems. You will be involved in economic judgments which most economists would hesitate to make. At what point, for example, does military aid become burdensome to a country and make its freedom endangered rather than helping to secure it. To what extent can the gold and dollar cost of our overseas deployments be offset by foreign procurement? Or at what stage can a new weapons system be considered sufficiently advanced to justify large dollar appropriations?

In many countries, your posture and performance will provide the local population with the only evidence of what our country is really like. In other countries, your military mission, its advice and action, will play a key role in determining whether those people will remain free. You will need to understand the importance of military power and also the limits of military power, to decide what arms should be used to fight and when they should be used to prevent a fight, to determine what represents our vital interests and what interests are only marginal.

Above all, you will have a responsibility to deter war as well as to fight it. For the basic problems facing the world today are not susceptible of a final military solution. While we will long require the services and admire the dedication and commitment of the fighting men of this country, neither our strategy nor our psychology as a nation, and certainly not our economy, must become permanently dependent upon an ever-increasing military establishment.

Our forces, therefore, must fulfill a broader role as a complement to our diplomacy, as an arm of our diplomacy, as a deterrent to our adversaries, and as a symbol to our allies of our determination to support them.

These words captured the tone of the U.S. commitment to, and SF-led advisory efforts in, Southeast Asia and elsewhere across the globe in the 1960s.



Kennedy's 14 June 1962 letter to 2LT Kirschenbauer, thanking him and the Class of 1962 for the gift.

A GIFT FOR THE PRESIDENT

At the conclusion of JFK's speech, Class of 1962 President Cadet George W. Kirschenbauer presented the Commander-in-Chief with a 14-karat gold class ring and a scroll designating him as an honorary class member, "the first time a commencement speaker has been so honored."⁷ In gratitude, the White House sent a letter to newly commissioned Second Lieutenant (2LT) Kirschenbauer on 14 June 1962, writing, "I am fully aware of the distinction accorded me when you and your classmates made me an Honorary Member of the Class of 1962. . . The class ring, with the engraved seal of the President of the United States, is a most handsome

one which I shall treasure, and the beautiful silver humidor has a place of honor in my office."⁸ After the President's assassination in November 1963, the ring ended up with a private collector. Forty-three years after JFK's appearance at West Point, the ring was auctioned and sold for \$42,000. Eventually, the ring made its way back to the Academy and was placed on display on the second floor of the Jefferson Hall library.⁹

After Kennedy's speech and gifting of a class ring, Kennedy personally awarded diplomas to the top 30 Distinguished Cadets, culminating with Cadet John H. Fagan, Jr., first in his class of 598. The pressures of his office forced JFK to depart the ceremony before completion. As Kennedy and his party exited Gillis Field House, the USMA band played Ruffles and Flourishes and "Hail to the Chief."¹⁰ He bade farewell to Westmoreland and departed in the presidential limousine.¹¹ The President's time at West Point entered the pages of history.

Kennedy's words at the Academy echoed long after the event and his tragic assassination in Novem-

LEFT: Top graduate Cadet John H. Fagan, Jr., receives his diploma and congratulations from Westmoreland and Kennedy. **RIGHT:** Kennedy bids Westmoreland farewell as he leaves Gillis Field House, with the graduation ceremony resuming shortly afterward.



THE CEREMONY RESUMES

Once the President and his party had departed, the remaining graduates received their diplomas. Among them was future four-star general Wayne A. Downing, who later commanded the 75th Ranger Regiment, Joint Special Op-

erations Command, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command, prior to his passing in 2007.¹² Another was Frank S. Reasoner, “the only cadet to win four Brigade Boxing Championships in four different weight classes.”¹³ Commissioned into the U.S. Marine Corps, Reasoner was killed in Vietnam on 12 July 1965, while commanding Company A, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, posthumously receiving the Medal of Honor.¹⁴ Still another graduate was James V. Kimsey, future co-founder,

Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of America Online (AOL), and founder of the non-profit Kimsey Foundation. He is the namesake of today’s four-story, 120,000-square-foot Kimsey Athletic Center, home of West Point’s football program.¹⁵ After diplomas were presented, the Corps of the Cadets sang the West Point anthem, “Alma Mater.” The National Anthem was then played before the administration of the oath of office by MG Westmoreland and, finally, the benediction by Catholic Chaplain Joseph P. Moore.¹⁶

(Image credit: Assembly)



West Point Class of 1962 celebrates at the conclusion of the graduation ceremony.



ber 1963. Operation WHITE STAR, the U.S. Army Special Warfare mission in Laos, shut down in July 1962, the month after his speech. However, the SF-led advisory effort in Vietnam that began in 1957 continued to mount, culminating with the deployment of 5th Special Forces Group (SFG) to Nha Trang in late 1964. While a large conventional presence served as a bulwark against Soviet aggression in Europe, JFK's belief in SF as the antidote for enemy insurgencies and other non-conventional challenges shaped the American approach in other locations. Examples of these included Thailand, where the 46th SF Company trained elements of the Royal Thai Army into the early 1970s, and Bolivia, where an 8th SFG team trained Bolivian Rangers, who in turn captured international Communist agitator Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in late 1967.¹⁷ Kennedy's depiction of Special Forces as "too unconventional to be called conventional" and as "growing in number and importance" rang true long after they were first spoken at Gillis Field House at West Point in June 1962.

While not intended to be prophetic, President John F. Kennedy's remarks have, in many respects,

TOP LEFT: SF soldiers work with counterparts in the central highland village of Buon Enao, Republic of Vietnam, in early 1962. **TOP RIGHT:** 8th SFG Sergeant Alvin E. Graham (right) trains Bolivian infantrymen on the Browning .30 caliber light machinegun. SF efforts in Bolivia helped that nation's military neutralize infamous Communist agitator Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in late 1967. **BOTTOM:** Members of 46th SF Company pose with their Royal Thai Army counterparts.





ENDNOTES

- 1 See Charles H. Briscoe, "JFK Visits Fort Bragg: A Photo Essay," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 14/2 (2018): 32-42, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v14n2_jfk_fort_bragg_visit_page_1.html.
- 2 Letter from the White House to the U.S. Army, 11 April 1962, copy in Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Special Warfare* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Information, Department of the Army, 1962).
- 3 John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "Commencement Address at United States Military Academy, West Point (New York), 10:01 AM," <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHP/1962/Month%2006/Day%2006/JFKWHP-1962-06-06-A>, hereafter "Commencement Address"; West Point Alumni Foundation, "June Week," *Assembly* (Summer 1962): 10, hereafter "June Week."
- 4 "Commencement Address."
- 5 USMA, Program, "Graduation Exercises, 1962," 6 June 1962, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Graduation Program.
- 6 "Commencement Address."
- 7 "June Week," 11.
- 8 Letter from the White House to Second Lieutenant George W. Kirschenbauer, 14 June 1962, copy in "June Week," 3.
- 9 50th Reunion Digest, 19.
- 10 "June Week," 11.
- 11 "Commencement Address."
- 12 "Class of 6 June 1962."
- 13 West Point Association of Graduates, "Wristband Provides Motivational Punch," 3 March 2015, <https://www.westpointaog.org/firstcallmarch32015>.
- 14 West Point Class of 1962, We Did!: 50th Reunion Digest, May 2012, 12, <https://www.slide-share.net/frebo3/west-point-class-of-1962-50th-reunion-digest>, hereafter *50th Reunion Digest*; USMA, "Class of 6 June 1962, Arranged According to General Merit," copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter "Class of 6 June 1962."
- 15 *50th Reunion Digest*, 13; "Class of 6 June 1962"; USMA, "Notable Graduates," n.d., <https://www.westpoint.edu/about/history-of-west-point/notable-graduates>; Kimsey Foundation, <https://www.kimseyfoundation.org/>. *Kimsey passed away in 2016.*
- 16 Graduation Program.
- 17 For information about SF's role in these and other locations, see USASOC History Office, "Special Forces," https://arsof-history.org/branch_special_forces.html, and "ARSOF Timeline," https://arsof-history.org/arsof_timeline/index.html.

JFK's words in June 1962 continue to reverberate in the 21st century. Here, 10th SFG soldiers and their Lithuanian counterparts wait to board a U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawk during Exercise Combined Resolve XVI on 6 December 2021, in Hohenfels, Germany. The exercise assessed the readiness of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, and helped Ukrainian and Lithuanian Special Operations Forces hone their irregular warfare skills.

remained timeless, as evident in America's present-day Great Power Competition with its former Cold War adversaries, China and Russia. The world has witnessed firsthand "another type of warfare" following the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. With myriad threats ema-

nating from peer and near-peer competitors, Kennedy's words about the Army's role remain remarkably salient: "Our forces, therefore, must fulfill a broader role as . . . an arm of our diplomacy, as a deterrent to our adversaries, and as a symbol to our allies of our determination to support them." 