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Remarks by William J. Perry  
U.S. Secretary of Defense  
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In each person's life, there always comes a moment in time when a door opens and lets the future in. For each of you graduates, that decisive moment has come. Your graduation has opened such a door.

Our nation is also at such a decisive moment. The ending of the Cold War has opened a door and the future is out there – waiting to come in. As citizens, we can influence that future with our actions. As the Secretary of Defense, my actions clearly affect the national security of the United States. But it is also true that your actions will affect our future national security.

Our national security goals are to ensure that our nation's future entails the same blessings of freedom that we enjoy today, and that we sustain that freedom without the tragedy of war. But we have long since learned that freedom is not free, and that our security is inextricably joined with that of other nations. Therefore, to achieve these goals, the American people must fully engage with the other nations of the world. That is, we must recognize that problems in other parts of the globe can ultimately affect our own security, and that we must work in concert with other nations to resolve these problems.

Whether our nation chooses to engage with the world or to retreat from it will profoundly affect your future – and the future of your children. And that choice will be made by you and your generation.

History has demonstrated the importance of engagement twice already in this century at moments when, as now, the door opened and let the future in. These decisive moments occurred immediately after the endings of World War I and World War II.

At the end of World War I, our nation chose isolation, and the college graduates of that period embraced that decision. Americans were told that the war was about "making the world safe for democracy." And it was called the "war to end all wars." So after it was over, most Americans – including the college grads of that era – wanted us to withdraw from the world stage. Instead of providing the strong leadership needed to implement President Wilson's Fourteen Points, and to establish a strong League of Nations, Americans withdrew – and took comfort instead from President Warren Harding's campaign promise of a "return to normalcy."

We withdrew politically – by not joining the League of Nations, dooming the League to failure. We withdrew militarily – letting our armed forces grow weak. And we withdrew psychologically – letting ourselves fall back on the old idea that America was an "island nation"; an island nation whose security was protected by the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Pacific on the other.

The result was the Roaring Twenties, and young Americans who wanted a piece of the action – and a piece of the fun. It was called the “flapper generation” by some; the “lost generation” by others.

What really was lost was an opportunity: the opportunity to build a safer world; and the opportunity to head off another world war through a strong League of Nations and strong American diplomacy. So we did have a second world war, and we did send another generation of young Americans “over there.” Only this time “over there” meant the Pacific, as well as Europe.

Almost 300,000 Americans were killed in battle in World War II. In the '20s, we had a self-absorbed “lost generation.” And in the '40s, we almost lost a generation.

Could America have prevented World War II if we had stayed engaged with the world? Would a muscular League of Nations backed by American will have been able to stop Hitler and others from making war? We only live history once, so we can never be sure of the answers to those questions. But we clearly owed it to those 300,000 Americans who died, and their families, to have tried harder.

But ultimately we prevailed in World War II, and we then faced another decisive moment – another door opening. But this time we did not retreat from the world. Because shortly after the war ended, a new threat appeared on the horizon: the Soviet Union. And when the post-World War II generation of young Americans saw this new threat, they were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. They knew that the best way to counter this threat was for America to stay engaged in world affairs.

I was part of this generation, getting my master's degree from Stanford in 1950. I had already served in the Army of Occupation in Japan, and had seen firsthand the devastation of the war resulting from the bombings of Tokyo and the invasion of Okinawa. My whole outlook – and the outlook of my classmates – was dominated by world affairs and national security issues. We saw the dawn of the nuclear age – and understood that it threatened to destroy virtually all life on earth. We heard Winston Churchill's famous declaration that an Iron Curtain had descended across Europe. And we understood that behind that Iron Curtain was a Soviet-led war machine that threatened to blitzkrieg across Europe like Hitler had done only 10 years before.

If you were in the class of 1950, these weren't just issues you thought about in your international relations class. Indeed, the Korean War started just two weeks after I was graduated and received my reserve commission from ROTC, so I fully expected that I would be called to fight in that war.

Because of this background, the post-World War II generation knew that the path to peace lay in strong American leadership on the world stage. They built the United Nations; they rebuilt Europe through the Marshall Plan. They created NATO – the most successful military alliance in history. And they adopted two key national security policies – containment and deterrence – that were right for their time.

The two regional wars we fought in this period, in Korea and Vietnam, were tragedies – for our people and the people of those countries. But as tragic as they were, they were contained. They did not explode into World War III, with the catastrophic consequences that would have entailed. Indeed, throughout this entire period, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust was hanging over our heads like a dark cloud,

threatening the extinction of all mankind.

But we got through this dangerous period. Today the Cold War is truly over. And with the ending of the Cold War we now face another open door – the third decisive moment of this century. How we respond to this moment will affect your security and the security of your children for decades to come. The end of the Cold War means that it's a much safer world than when you entered Stanford as freshmen. And this makes it very tempting for your generation to do what the generation after World War I did: to turn your backs on the world, believing that its problems are not America's problems.

If you believe this, you are not alone. Some people think that the world will take care of itself; that we've just won the "Cold War to end all Cold Wars." Indeed, just a few years ago it was argued that we had reached "the end of history."

But history is still being written every day: in the hills of Bosnia; in the streets of Port-au-Prince; in the deserts of Arabia; and in the mountains of Korea. With the end of the Cold War, the threats to America's security have been transformed, but not extinguished. The threat of nuclear holocaust no longer hangs over us. But we now face the threat of nuclear proliferation as rogue states and terrorists seek nuclear weapons. And we're learning that the end of the Cold War has not meant the end of regional wars, as a devastating war tears apart Bosnia and threatens to spread into a wider Balkan war.

Ignoring these threats would be irresponsible. And for America to try to deal with them unilaterally – to try to go it alone – is impractical. Even when it is possible, going it alone is both more difficult and more costly in terms of dollars and in terms of lives. Indeed, the best way to deal with these threats is for America to stay fully engaged with the world and to work in concert with other nations who share our interests.

Let me give you some examples. First, the Persian Gulf. There is little doubt that in 1991 America could have ejected Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait all by ourselves. But we were far better off building an international coalition that included some 30 nations from around the world, and which operated under a mandate from the United Nations. Fighting the war through this coalition saved American taxpayers billions of dollars. And, more important, it saved the lives of many American soldiers.

Today, we're still engaged in the Gulf working to make sure no one tries to blackmail the world by cutting off the Gulf's oil supply. And this effort proved its value last October when Iraq's army headed south toward Kuwait once again. In response to this provocation, President Clinton ordered a rapid reinforcement of our military forces in the Gulf region. We were joined by forces from the United Kingdom, France, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. When Saddam Hussein saw this build-up and resolve, his forces returned to their barracks – without a shot being fired.

Back in 1990, it took us about three weeks to put a significant deterrent force into the Gulf. In 1994, we did it in about three days. The reason it went so much quicker this time is because we've spent these last four years engaged with our allies and planning for this type of emergency. The Gulf War in 1991 was a good example of America's ability to fight a war. But the Gulf buildup in 1994 was a good example of how

America's engagement helped us to prevent a war.

We are also engaged with the former Warsaw Pact states, including the many newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The cornerstone is NATO's Partnership for Peace program, designed to help the armed forces from former Warsaw Pact nations learn how to operate in a democracy and under civilian control. Last week I attended a meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels with defense ministers from 39 nations – some NATO, some formerly Warsaw Pact and some neutral. I sat between the ministers from Uzbekistan and Ukraine. Sitting across the table from me were the ministers from Albania and Armenia. Together we planned joint exercises in peacekeeping, search and rescue missions, and humanitarian relief. One of the Eastern European ministers told me that he had spent most of his career planning nuclear strikes against NATO targets. He never dreamed that he would one day be sitting in NATO headquarters cooperating with NATO defense ministers in peacekeeping missions.

But perhaps the most dramatic example of where America's engagement today is paying off is in the former Soviet Union. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union built up massive arsenals of nuclear weapons and threatened each other with extinction under a doctrine called Mutual Assured Destruction, appropriately dubbed as MAD. Today, instead of building new nuclear weapons, the United States and Russia are dismantling thousands of weapons each year, and we're cooperating to prevent them from spreading to other nations.

This isn't happening all by itself. It's happening because we are engaged with the nations of the former Soviet Union. In January of last year the United States signed an accord with Russia and Ukraine in which Russia and the United States agreed to help Ukraine in dismantling its nuclear weapons. Ukraine, with the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world, agreed to become a non-nuclear state.

Two months later, I was invited by the Ukrainian president to visit Pervomaysk to witness the beginning of dismantlement. Pervomaysk used to be home to the Soviet Union's most important ICBM launch facilities, a crown jewel in its nuclear arsenal. During my visit there I went into the launch control center which controlled 700 nuclear warheads – all aimed at targets in the United States- enough to obliterate every major American city. It was a truly chilling sight to see the two young officers go through their practice countdown, up to but not including the launch command. This year, I visited Pervomaysk again, and watched as a nuclear missile was slowly pulled out of its silo to be taken to a dismantlement facility. By next year this missile field will have reverted to a wheat field. And Ukraine will have become a nuclear-free nation.

All of this is happening only because we have engaged in a cooperative program with Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus to help them dismantle their nuclear weapons. This program has helped to dismantle more than 2,000 nuclear warheads, remove 750 missiles from their launchers and destroy almost 600 launchers and bombers. The money we spend on this program is now being questioned by the Congress as they seek to reduce our spending on foreign aid. At the Pentagon, we don't call this foreign aid. We call it "defense by other means."

The transformation of our nuclear policies and the opening of NATO to Central

and Eastern European partners are the defining issues of whether or not we will be successful in building peace – or be forced someday to fall back again to the tired old habits of war. How we handle these and other security questions will determine whether or not your country may one day have to send you or your sons and daughters to war.

So you have a stake – a big stake – in how we engage the world on these crucial issues. But you and your generation are more than affected by the outcome; you are also participants. As citizens in a democratic society, it is your collective voice which ultimately determines our foreign policy – whether we engage or retreat; whether we operate with allies or try to impose our will unilaterally. Additionally, in your professional careers you are about to “enter the global marketplace.” Like a lot of clichés, the term “global marketplace” has a basis in truth. For some of you it means that you will work in places like Tokyo, Moscow and Beijing. For others it means that you will work in sectors of the economy that are heavily dependent on international trade or the international exchange of ideas. For almost all of you it means that you will be connected with others in your profession anywhere in the world by simply turning on your computer.

For my generation, the rest of world was a costly and time-consuming plane ride away. For you it's as simple as clicking your mouse. In short, most of you by necessity will be engaged with the world economically. It is naive to think that you can avoid being engaged with the world politically. You can't be an isolationist in a world where you can click on to the World Wide Web.

Engagement is not just an attitude. And it's not something that only concerns government officials or political scientists. There's also an active role for everyday people – business people, academics, doctors, lawyers. Much of the work of rebuilding the post-Cold War economies of Central and Eastern Europe is being supported by private Americans. Private citizens – including Stanford's Franklin Johnson and Bill Draper – are teaching market economics, banking and other skills necessary for these and other former communist states to participate in the global economy. Others are monitoring elections and helping build democratic institutions. And private citizens – including Stanford's David Holloway, John Lewis and David Bernstein – are playing a critical role in nuclear dismantlement. Today, in Russia and Ukraine, American business people, including many from Stanford, are working to convert former weapons factories into factories that make pre-fab houses, hearing aids and air traffic control systems.

Having spent a good part of your adult life here at Stanford, you have already practiced a kind of engagement. Because many students here – and at colleges across the country – come from all over the world. We have the world right here in this stadium. Your studies, activities and daily lives together have – in their own way – brought the world closer together. And so, every one of you graduating today – whether you're from Peoria or Pretoria – are ambassadors in waiting, with the chance and the challenge to apply your experience to create a new era of understanding from which the seeds of peace can take root.

I urge this generation of college graduates to help make America stronger and

the world safer by choosing the path of engagement in the world, as did the post-World War II generation, and not the path of isolation chosen by the post-World War I generation. John Donne's poem begins with the famous line: "No man is an island." It is also true that in the modern world, no nation is an island. There can be no "Fortress America" that is not an integral part of the larger community of nations. America is woven into the fabric of the world. I urge you not only to accept this idea but to embrace it.

President John Kennedy believed that one person can make a difference, and that every person should try. This belief inspired my generation. It should inspire yours as well.