Thank you for the introduction Midshipman [Austin] Harmel. Vice Admiral Carter, and Naval Academy faculty: thank you for the invitation. And to the Brigade of Midshipmen: thank you for the welcome. I am honored to be here. And I’m excited that I have the opportunity to join you and see you at this stage in your development as leaders.

As I look around the auditorium I have to say that I am impressed at the sight of the Brigade. You come from all 50 states in the union, and a few of you even come from other nations.

We have prior enlisted and straight out of high-school – we have plebes, youngsters, firsties and...and...Second Classes – my point is you come from all different backgrounds, yet you are all one. One Brigade of Midshipmen. One team.

Ex Scientia Tridens is your motto but the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” could be a fitting description for this group tonight. We could say the same about our Nation’s armed forces—not only for the people serving in them, who come from so many different backgrounds – but also for the way the various services work together jointly. Each branch brings their individual specialties and skill sets to the fight in order to achieve a common goal—resulting in a case where the total is greater than the sum of the parts.

That concept comes from a book that I encourage you all to read. It’s called The Armed Forces Officer—many editions of it have been printed and I’m particularly fond of the 2007 edition—but it’s the kind of book you can learn from throughout every stage in your career. And
a wise leader knows that whether you are an E-1, an O-10, or anything in between, the learning process is never finished.

You’re learning plenty of things here at the Naval Academy. Science — mathematics — close order drill — camaraderie — that you need to get better at skipping out on a Forrestal Lecture. But the most valuable thing the Naval Academy teaches you is leadership. But what is leadership?

The concept of leadership can sometimes be hard to articulate beyond a dictionary-style definition. Maybe we can point out individuals we consider to be leaders—kind of an “I know it when I see it” thing. We can list traits that make someone a good or a bad leader. But there’s a certain part of leadership that is intangible—hard to quantify.

What does it mean to be a leader? What does it take to be a leader? Given enough time, we could answer these questions I suppose. But they’re weighty questions—they’re big topics. Too big for us to tackle in a single evening lecture—which is why we will be having twelve more starting tomorrow...

But I do believe that the concept of leadership is too big to address in a single night—so I’d like to take one component of the “leadership” equation and examine it a little bit closer. And that component is trust.

So what does it mean to be a commissioned officer? Now you’re probably thinking, “Wait a second, I thought he was going to talk about trust...”—that’s assuming you weren’t thinking about O’Brien’s.

But in all seriousness—being a commissioned officer is completely intertwined with the concept of trust. Back in 2002, retired Marine Corps General John R. Allen—who at the time was Colonel Allen and Commandant of Midshipmen—observed that “there is no greater
demonstration of the trust of the Republic than its expression and bestowal of an officer’s commission.”

Being an officer means that our Nation has entrusted you with a great deal. To quote our reference text—*The Armed Forces Officer*—“this trust involves the majesty of the nation’s authority in matters involving the lives and deaths of its citizens.” — Let me repeat that “this trust involves the majesty of the nation’s authority in matters involving the lives and deaths of its citizens.”

Another way of looking at it—to paraphrase Secretary Mattis—is that:

“Those entrusted by our nation with carrying out violence, [and] those entrusted with the lives of our troops...must set an honorable example in all we do.”

Someday soon you will find yourself walking out of Bancroft Hall for the last time, on your way to the Fleet. And in the Fleet you’ll be entrusted with the tools of warfare. You must wield those tools and their capacity for violence judiciously. More importantly, you’ll be entrusted with the lives of our Nation’s sons and daughters. You must place their well-being above your own. You must be honorable in all that you do.

The reason our Nation is going to place their trust in you is because of the promise you’ll make at your commissioning. Admiral Arleigh Burke pointed out that when you swear to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” you are assuming:

“The most formidable obligation you will ever encounter in life. Thousands upon thousands of men and women have died to preserve for you the opportunity to take such an oath. What you’re actually doing is pledging your means, your talent, your very life to your country.”
Your very life...that is a serious pledge. But that is the level of seriousness needed when we’re talking about the trust placed in the military.

You can thank the officers who have come before you for the trust the American people will place in you. Those who have gone before you have proven the worth of the officer corps’ tradition, professionalism and character. You’ll be joining a group that already has an established relationship of trust with the American people. It’s the kind of relationship that takes a long time to build but can be quickly soured. There are certainly instances where severe damage has been done. But as you all will enter into that relationship shortly, I ask that you commit yourself to earning, building and preserving that trust.

Once again, “What does it mean to be a commissioned officer?” Well first, it means that you are a citizen-soldier—part of a tradition that stretches all the way back to democracy’s roots. The birth of the citizen-soldier is found in ancient Greece. These warriors were vested members of their society; bearing arms to defend their people and way of life. Their motivation went beyond self-interest—they were moved by a commitment to their ideals.

America’s citizen-soldier may not bear the spear and shield of a Greek warrior but the spirit is the same. They have taken up the cause without the coercion of a dictator or fickleness of a mercenary. Instead, they have “taken an oath of service above and beyond the ordinary” and answered our Nation’s call —time and time again.

From the militia fighting to earn freedom during the Revolution to our Sailors and Marines that defend it today — our citizen-soldiers have earned the trust of the American people through commitment and sacrifice. The American people trust the defense of their lives, their
freedoms and all they hold dear, to our citizen-soldiers because of the track record. Being a commissioned officer means carrying that legacy forward.

It also means that you are a professional—a member of the profession of arms.

What is a profession? It’s more than job. To be a professional requires prolonged training. Being a professional means you have met demanding qualifications. The phrase “trusted professional” is ubiquitous for a reason. It’s because professionals know what they’re doing—it’s because they get the job done right.

Prolonged training. Well, that sounds like something you’re going through here at the Academy. It also sounds like something you’ll be doing on your way to the Fleet after commissioning. And once you get to the Fleet, you’ll have met some demanding qualifications. So don’t let there be any doubt in your mind — when you are out there, in the Fleet, you are expected to be a professional...a trusted professional.

One thing to keep in mind about professionals is that they’re never done learning. They don’t stop training and they keep working to become more qualified. That’s true whether you’re playing in the NFL, practicing medicine or an officer in the military.

Our enlisted personnel also go through prolonged training and are highly qualified. They, too, are members of the profession of arms, but officers are distinguished in a specific way. The author of the first edition of *The Armed Forces Officer*, General Samuel Marshall, wrote that “what distinguishes the officer is ‘exceptional and unremitting responsibility.” As “a leader of character, they accept unmitigated personal responsibility and accountability to duty, for their actions and those of their subordinates.”
Basically, we can say that ultimate responsibility rests with the commissioned officer. Wrapped up in this responsibility is the need to preserve the trust that our Nation places in its Armed Forces. General William Tecumseh Sherman warned:

“No other profession holds out to the worthy so certain a reward for intelligence and fidelity, no people on earth so generously and willingly accord to the soldier the most exalted praise for heroic conduct in action, or for long and faithful service, as do the people of the United States; nor does any other people so overwhelmingly cast away those who fail at the critical moment, or who betray their trusts.”

We cannot afford to betray the trust of the American people. We cannot afford to fail. As members of the profession of arms, you’ll be expected to get the job done well. As officers, you’ll have the responsibility to make sure the job gets done right—in every sense of the word. The trust-relationship demands it.

And that sense of responsibility is fundamental to the character of an officer—being a commissioned officer means that your character is worthy of trust.

General Norman Schwarzkopf wrote that, “Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy.” The General understood the importance of character. And I believe that a noble character is more important than strategy. Especially when it comes to preserving the trust-relationship.

What makes a noble character then? There are many things. Honor, respect, duty, service, excellence, courage, commitment and loyalty are just some of them. To paraphrase The Armed Forces Officer:
**Honor** is a compelling moral motivation to do the right thing at the right time.

**Respect** is positive regard for the humanity of others—it’s often the least discussed but most important value in leadership.

**Duty** is the sense of moral obligation to put mission accomplishment and responsibility before your personal needs and worries.

**Service** requires that you recognize yourself as a servant of the nation—it implies subordination and selflessness.

**Excellence** is a deep-seated personal passion for continuous improvement, innovation and exemplary results in everything.

**Courage** is the will to act rightly in the face of any form of danger or adversity.

**Commitment** is the total dedication to success.

**Loyalty** means that you are true, willing and unfailing in your devotion to our Nation’s cause.

These eight traits are required elements of an officer’s character—and without character, trust is fleeting.

As we close this evening, I have a challenge for you, and all Midshipmen. Earn the trust here, at the Naval Academy — through your conduct and dedication. Preserve the trust there, out in the Fleet when you get there — by your conduct and professionalism. Grow the trust as an officer, with your conduct and leadership. At each stage of your development, remember the trust involved — and conduct yourselves manner worthy of trust. Trust is our most valuable attribute when it comes to the relationship we have with the American people.
Keep your moral compass set to true north and do not deviate from that course. You are responsible for the bridge of trust between Sailors/Marines and the American public. Always be thinking “How can the decision I am presently making impact the equity of the Naval Enterprise?”

Tonight I’m encouraged because of your energy and spirit. I’m encouraged to see Commanding Officers in the making and I am reminded of the words of Joseph Conrad:

“Only a seaman realizes to what great extent an entire ship reflects the personality and ability of one individual...

In each ship there is one person who, in the hour of emergency or peril at sea, can turn to no other...

This is the most difficult and demanding assignment in the Navy...

...this is the spur which has given the Navy its great leaders...

It is a duty which richly deserves the highest, time-honored title of the seafaring world – Captain.”

Someday soon you will be sent over the horizon and across the seas...we will send you with our thanks, our support and the sacred trust of our Nation.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.