Thank you very much. Dean Stavridis and members of the faculty, distinguished guests, and of course the students and families of the graduating class of 2014, it’s an honor to be amongst the Fletcher Family today and I’m truly humbled by this recognition. I have many people to thank, but I’d like to begin first and foremost by thanking my wife Praya and our son Alexander for their continued support of my public diplomacy obsession during my years at the State Department. To my parents who are here today, thank you for your support and encouragement. To my colleagues from the Department of State, many of whom are serving overseas but some of whom are here today, I am deeply grateful for the camaraderie and support both of which I know have helped us advance U.S. foreign policy objectives in some of the most difficult places on earth. I’d also like to acknowledge and thank Secretaries of State Powell, Rice, Clinton, and Kerry. Lest it sound like I’m being overly diplomatic and overtly bipartisan, I extend my gratitude to these four because my career has spanned four Secretaries of State thus far and it has been an honor to serve under the leadership of all four individuals. Finally, I’d like to acknowledge the Foreign Service Nationals from across the Middle East and North Africa with whom I’ve had the distinct pleasure and privilege of working with for almost a decade. From Ramallah to Baghdad, and from Cairo to Muscat, the locally engaged staff at our embassies abroad who work hand in hand with U.S. public diplomacy practitioners in the field are truly the backbone of our engagement efforts overseas, and the great risks and sacrifices they take and make each and every day help America bridge those proverbial “last three feet.”

At last night’s event, I had an opportunity to meet a number of students from your class and I was both excited and heartened to hear about all that you have accomplished thus far, and about all things – some of them, very entrepreneurial – I know you will accomplish in the future. Some of you will be joining the Department of State or the U.S. Agency for International Development, or service to the United States in some other form or fashion, and I look forward to seeing you around the hallways of the Department or at interagency meetings where we’ll work together to advance U.S. interests abroad. For the international students some of whom will be returning to your own countries to become your nation’s newest diplomats and development professionals, I applaud you for your commitment to public service, and I look forward to seeing you across a negotiating table one day in the future.

For those of us who have studied the life and work of Edward R. Murrow, there is much from his legacy for us to consider. In my own career with the Department, I began pondering Murrow’s examples on my very first day on the job, more than a decade ago. So much so, that in 2008 when I volunteered to serve as the Public Diplomacy Officer on a State Department-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Southern Iraq, I
decided to join a public dialogue that Murrow began more than half a century ago. “This I Believe,” a five-minute CBS Radio broadcast in the United States that ran from 1951 to 1955 and was broadcast to nearly 100 countries around the world, asked its listeners to put into a few short words, what they believed. As I prepared to embark upon what would be the most difficult assignment of my career, I, too, sought to answer that all-important question Murrow asked of his listeners: What did I believe? What did I believe of our policy? What did I believe could be accomplished? Did I believe public diplomacy in the middle of a war zone was a viable tool of engagement? In my own search for what I believed about our efforts in Iraq, I became a student not only of foreign policy, but also of orienteering, learning how to read my own moral compass so that I might always find and follow a path that honored my values as an individual and my oath as a public servant.

After completing, what was at times a very harrowing year down-range in Iraq, I volunteered to go back for a second time, and just before I left the comforts of my American life in July of 2010, I finally penned my own “This I Believe” essay, which was published that year.

So – very briefly – today I would like to share with you, in the great tradition started by Murrow, what I believe:

I’m a United States diplomat and I believe in diplomacy in tough places. Far away from the cocktail parties in cushy Western capitals that still represent the narrow stereotype of my chosen profession, American diplomacy is being practiced in the most difficult places and under the most challenging of circumstances.

For this Windsor-knotted, pinstriped, wing-tipped American diplomat, and for my many intrepid colleagues of the United States Foreign Service serving around the world in places where there is no wine, nor cheese, the practice of diplomacy in tough places has always been the rule rather than the exception.

From Badghis to Bujumbura, from Juba to Muthanna, America’s diplomats have consistently answered the call to serve on the front lines of diplomacy, representing the breadth and depth of America and all that she stands for. Without the camouflage of our uniformed military siblings, the slow and steady cadence of “wing tips” rather than “boots on the ground” continues to walk America’s ideas closer to foreign audiences around the globe. Through veterinary support to rural farmers, technical assistance for local electoral commissions, and strengthening the voices of rural women through artistic expression, diplomacy gives America the opportunity to reach that sweet spot of diplomatic engagement; what Edward R. Murrow called, “the last three feet.”

When earthquakes rumble, when tsunamis roar, when terrorism rages in places most Americans know only from headlines, the men and women of the Foreign Service are often tasked with being our nation’s first responders.
My last overseas diplomatic assignment – a year spent on a civilian-led provincial reconstruction team in Iraq’s deep south – taught me many things about diplomacy. Chief among them was this: in the toughest neighborhoods on earth, when the front lines of war transform into the main streets of peace and stability, diplomacy must be first on the scene. It is neither convenient, nor always safe, to practice diplomacy in such places, but it is absolutely necessary if America is to successfully engage the world.

As I head back to Iraq for another year of diplomatic service in a few short days, I count myself fortunate to be among the many “wing tips on the ground” who represent America and practice diplomacy in tough places.

Thank you.