Good Morning!

And thank you, Admiral, for that kind introduction. We are so fortunate to have you as our new Dean and to take part as you set a course for The Fletcher School to excel as we move forward into the 21st century with thoughtful insights and vision…and uncommon energy. You are an extraordinary leader in every sense of the word. I continue to learn from you.

To the faculty: I am honored and humbled to be here today as a proud Fletcher aluma and representative of The World Beyond the Hall of Flags. Sounds like I am talking about a kingdom from the Game of Thrones or something. It doesn’t seem possible that I was in the audience nearly two decades ago. Some of the faculty will recall that I was sure I was not going to graduate because I had not quite focused on that language requirement…I was too busy pondering about the next low intensity conflict thanks to Dr. Shultz, the issues going on in the Middle East thanks to Dr. Fawaz, and most certainly who was going coordinate the various spring BBQs and dinners that Dr. Hess had so generously offered to host. I am convinced it was a miracle that saved me and allowed me to pass in French so that I could join the Class of 1995 on graduation day.

To my fellow alumni – welcome back! I know you will have a wonderful weekend with old friends and faculty. A piece of advice based on my own experience – for some reason current students are getting younger. It is some kind of trick. Don’t let that detract from your time back on campus.

To the Administrator of USAID, Dr. Shah: welcome to The Fletcher School. Raj, I’m used to seeing you at the Secretary’s morning meeting, so this is a new venue for us. Under a tent! I bet you return to DC with new ideas from your conversations with some of our newly minted Fletcherites…Education for women and girls? Fighting extreme poverty?
Health innovation? Climate change? Economic policy? Energy equality? You have come to the right place and we are happy to welcome you.

Now, let me turn to you… soon to be graduates…

Congratulations! I am excited for you for many reasons --- our planet needs Fletcher kind of leaders, communities require a Fletcher brand of innovation, governments demand global perspectives with Fletcher training, and businesses need Fletcher acumen and international savvy.

It is not an exaggeration to tell you that the path since I graduated was only possible because of the experience I had here at Fletcher. I could not have known when I was sitting in your seat the crazy and unexpected professional journey I would take over the course of two decades but what I do know looking back is that everything that I am doing now professionally came from my learning here at Fletcher.

It is actually quite fitting that the Administrator of USAID is on the stage today. I came to Fletcher having worked at USAID for Administrator Roskens and thinking that I would concentrate on development when I got here. Imagine my shock to find that when I opened the course catalogue I was drawn to something called International Security Studies as well as Islamic Civilizations and Southwest Asia. It is fair to say that prior to coming here I did not know what those fields were! I never took even one class in development! Instead I jumped into issues on front pages of the New York Times and The International Herald Tribune. Yes, I mean real papers. The kind you turn with your hand and produces ink stains.

Spoiler alert: don’t be alarmed! Some of you will have careers based on a trending hashtag.

When I was here the folks in Washington were concentrating on insurgencies and thinking about what was on the horizon in that domain. Note, though Al Qaeda existed and attacked us, our world was not thinking about non state actors in that way. We were thinking about peace in the Middle East…real peace. I started at Fletcher in September of 1993 – that is when President Clinton, Mr. Arafat and Mr. Rabin signed the Peace Accords. And, this was the era that Sam Huntington’s Clash of
Civilizations had just been published and no matter what hall you walked down at Fletcher students were debating his premise. I should note that in 2014 we still are…and every single day since 9/11 I have talked about the ideology of “us and them.”

Fletcher kept me focused on the globe in ways that integrated all aspects of what I had seen at USAID but also what I was reading about in the news. My professors were able to help me move my ideas into action and I look back on their confidence in me and think about the course they were setting…I remember going to a luncheon on the 7th floor of Cabot with special guest General Zinni who said that the most terrifying place on earth was Kashmir, the place that I happened to have been born. I recall being asked by Dr. Shultz and Dr. Bose to think about doing my MALD on the conflict in Kashmir and it was only because I received grants from The Fletcher School that I was able to travel to the region to do first hand interviews with militants. I call it my James Bond summer. No Americans were being allowed in at that time but I…well…fibbed a little…and said I was there to visit family which I was, but also secretly interviewing militants. That experience provided me with a foundation to understand extremism and radicalization and the power of ideology. But I did not know that then.

When 9/11 happened I was working in the private sector in Boston but I felt compelled to serve my nation. I went back to Washington and have been there for the last ten years -- as a political appointee in both the Bush and Obama administrations. Yes, it is possible – and I have lived to tell the tale.

I first went back to USAID but then went to the National Security Council and then the Department of State. I was innovating around issues to counter violent extremist ideology. I was connecting pieces from the ground up – where history, culture and religion meet political ideology and violent extremism. It was a Fletcher class in actuality. It was the way we use hard and soft power to contain and diminish a global threat.

A few years ago I was sitting on the banks of a roaring river in the heart of the Pamir Mountains. I had just traveled there from Dushanbe on a really sketchy airplane that had no business flying. What I did for my country!
Like many of you when you came here you were exposed to things that made you think differently. As I sat by that river I remember thinking about how Dr. Hess had explained the horizontal and vertical movements of people and military innovation, the Taklamakan Desert and influence of the Silk Road. And there I was right there as Special Representative to Muslim Communities speaking to youth influenced by ideas that came from outside of their communities – ideas that changed their sense of self and who’s powerful influence even struck Boylston Street a year ago.

The work that you will do in your careers may be, like mine, unnamed right now. There are allies we don’t yet know of and there are enemies yet to be actualized. There will be tools we haven’t discovered and opportunities we could not have imagined. And there will be new borders and old conflicts. Let face it -- there was no such thing as “CVE” (countering violent extremism) when I was a student here.

But the strength of your experience and exposure to fields, professors and fellow students will shape the way you live your life and how you influence our planet. At each turn in my career, Fletcher has been the foundation from which I build – whether my Fletcher gang Jolie Nahigian, David Scruggs, Joe Vorbach, or John Kruse to name a few…or special allies like Peter Ackerman or Betsy Powell. These people around you now are and will be an incredible source of support and guidance. And you know what they say about the Fletcher network? It is not an urban myth. Whether in Suriname or Sweden, Mauritania or Malaysia the Fletcher connection has been valuable and very special. For me, the Fletcher family has been just that – loving, supportive, and reliable.

You do not need to know what precisely you will do with this fantastic experience in the years ahead but you should know YOU. Your passion. What drives you. What is important to you.

What comes with that knowledge is powerful… and as our planet tries to deal with so many complex issues you will be moving us forward to contain threats, build resilience, grow economies and power the future.

I wish you a life that demonstrates who you are… and what you now have the power to do.
I hope and expect that #Fletcher will continue to be trending throughout your lives.

My hashtag for you: #BrightFletcherFuture

Congratulations!