Graduation Address: Administrator Rajiv Shah

Class Day Ceremony, May 17, 2014
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts

Good afternoon! Thank you, Dean Stavridis.

An honor under any circumstances, the Dean’s medal has special meaning to me today not least because you are one of my heroes.

Thank you, Academic Dean Ian Johnstone, Chairman Richard Thoman, Aaron Snipe, and my friend Farah Pandith.

There’s also a USAID contingent of Fletcher alums here today, including Jayne Thomisee, Judy Dunbar, Yoni Bock, and Hannah Fairbank.

They’re a lively, impressive bunch, and I hope you get a chance to talk to them.

As many of you know, Dean Stavridis has served on carriers, cruisers, and destroyers from Haiti to the Persian Gulf.

Through his service, he has influenced not only military strategy, but also American foreign and development policy—and our nation is stronger for it.

He’s a poet, a scholar, and a four-star Admiral—and yet… I’d wager that the title he is most proud of is not “Supreme Allied Commander, Europe…” but rather: “Dean of The Fletcher School.”

And that’s because he has always shown that more than military power, transformational ideas and the passion of young leaders have always had the bigger influence in shaping our world.

So, congratulations class of 2014!
Congratulations to your family, your friends, your professors, and your dean—all of whom deserve our immense appreciation for fostering a new class of global leaders.

A few weeks ago, our Deputy Administrator, Mark Feierstein—a Fletcher grad, by the way, class of ’87—arrived at the White House Situation Room for a meeting on the crisis in Ukraine.

At the table, he met a classmate whom he hadn’t seen in two-and-a-half decades. They got to talking. It turned out that one-third of those in the Sit Room had studied in the Hall of Flags.

You aren’t called the Fletcher Mafia for nothing.

“Don’t be fooled,” Jason Taylor wrote to me. “It’s the real thing.”

Jason is the chief of food assistance at our Mission in Ethiopia. Another Fletcher grad runs our foreign disaster office in Addis. And another runs our democracy and governance programs there.

Andy Sisson, the Director of the newly-founded U.S. Global Development Lab, is a Fletcher alum.

So is Alex Thier, our senior policy leader who is building a global coalition to end extreme poverty.

And Liz Warfield, who is overseeing a shift to investing in local solutions—so that someday strong local governments, local businesses, and civil society organizations will replace aid and put us out of business.

It was not until I was preparing to be here today that I fully appreciated the power Fletcher holds over our Agency. And I thought all along that I was in charge.

Now, we are not an anomaly. From diplomacy and law to the military—and increasingly—business, Fletcher graduates bring a sharp analytical eye, intense curiosity, and unrivaled passion to the conduct of foreign affairs.
Here in Medford, you not only develop the skills to change the world; you gain the confidence to do it.

When a devastating earthquake reduced Port-au-Prince to rumble, Fletcher students and alumni did not just donate money and send used clothing. You staffed the Fletcher Situation Room around the clock—just as you had during the violent days of the 2007 Kenyan elections—and helped geo-locate thousands of victims desperately pleading for help.

When graduating students Andrew Lala and Tommy Galloway decided they wanted to make a difference in the lives of poor families in Africa, they didn’t buy a vacation package that let them volunteer at an orphanage.

They wrote a business plan.

They figured out that you could use bus routes to better distribute solar lamps to remote communities, where every evening nightfall casts thriving towns back to the 12th century. Today, thousands of entrepreneurs just like them are building start-ups to do well by doing good.

When graduating student Roxanne Krystalli saw the how rape is used as a weapon of war and even seemingly safe spaces in refugee camps can become dangerous traps for young girls—Roxanne didn’t just write a paper.

She started a movement.

By introducing new coursework and welcoming new voices to campus, the Gender Initiative at Fletcher has helped us all better understand how violence and inequality impacts men and women, boys and girls differently.

There is no doubt about it—you are an extraordinary class.
You have confidence, vision, and optimism—and you’ve been in an environment that nurtures these leadership qualities.

As you leave Fletcher and enter—or return to—the professional world, you’ll certainly find that not everyone will encourage such boldness of spirit. You’ll hear that your optimism is naïve. You’ll be told to slow down.

You’ll be encouraged to wait until you have more experience—more losses under your belt—before you’ll really understand how the world works.

Now, I know that I don’t have four decades of professional experience from which to share some grand insights about your life.

But I do have one piece of advice, and that’s: be patient, hear them out—but don’t give up and don’t give in.

Because naïve optimism is precisely what you’ll need—and what the rest of us are counting on if we are going to realize extraordinary leaps of progress that would have been unimaginable only a decade ago.

In my own life, it is the moments of naïve optimism that have proven to be the most rewarding.

I left medical school to volunteer on Al Gore’s presidential campaign, because I really believed driving people back and forth to the airport would somehow change the world. And we all know how that worked out.

But it was fun, and I made life-long friends that continue to inspire me.

In a junior role at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, colleagues and I had a ridiculously naïve idea that you could sell immunization bonds in private capital markets.

Ten years and six billion dollars later, 440 million kids have been vaccinated against deadly diseases and 4 million lives have been saved.
More recently, we took on President Obama’s call to end hunger in the aftermath of a devastating global food, fuel, and financial crisis that had shrouded the world when the President took office.

And this coming week, we will announce that our efforts have helped dozens of countries change their policies, mobilized more than $7 billion in private investment, created breakthrough new seeds and fertilizers, and resulted in 12.5 million children moving out of hunger.

But I can tell you that for each of these successes, I have an even longer list of failures—moments when the skeptics were proven right, and change did not take hold.

Do you know who missed the most shots in basketball history? Michael Jordan.

And I’ve always wondered why our greatest athletes are encouraged to take risks even if they fail.

Meanwhile our efforts in diplomacy, defense, and development are held to ridiculously high standards that sometimes undermine our ability to think big and change the world.

USAID’s mission—which is to deliver on President Obama’s call to end extreme poverty in the next two decades—fundamentally requires the unyielding optimism and ability to take risks that I see in your class here today.

Because this goal is now achievable, but only if all of us—students, entrepreneurs, faith leaders, and government ministers—act together.

We can end extreme poverty for the 1.2 billion people who live on a dollar-and-a-quarter a day.

We can end it for the 860 million people who will go to sleep hungry tonight.
And we can end it for the 6.6 million children who will die this year before their 5th birthday.

As terrible as these numbers are, they do not adequately describe what poverty is—and what poverty does.

It drains our basic human dignity.

And if we’re being honest, it sometimes drains our compassion for those who suffer.

But there’s good news!

On continent after continent, a smaller share of people live this way than at any other time in our history.

From 1990 to 2010, child mortality fell by half, the number of children in primary school grew to 90 percent, and around 2 billion people gained access to clean water.

Since 1999, the total number of those living in extreme poverty has declined by nearly 50 million people every year, on average—despite a growing population.

Projections of what we can achieve differ, but most experts agree that reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty from 1.2 billion to 200 million people—roughly 3 percent of the global population in 2030—is an ambitious but achievable target.

Just imagine—for a moment—what that world looks like.

Girls and boys go to sleep every night with their bellies full of nutritious foods that fuel their minds as much as their bodies.

They go to school every day—free from the daily terror of being sold off as child brides or conscripted as child soldiers.
And they turn on the lights when they get home—with energy sourced from wind farms and geothermal stations.

As they survive and thrive, birth rates go down and countries experience a demographic dividend that creates jobs and spurs economic progress.

I see new partnerships creating this virtuous cycle of growth and opportunity every day.

I have met Nepali scientists who are working with us to harness satellite remote sensing data that enables farmers to estimate their crop yields and plan for floods.

I’ve met Senegalese farmers who are planting drought-tolerant seeds, using mobile phones to compare prices from different markets, and buying weather-indexed crop insurance that we developed with insurance companies to help farmers manage their risk just like any business owner would.

And in Colombia—where communities have endured five decades of intense violence—I met graduate students just like yourselves whose research on land tenure galvanized the government into action.

Over the next ten years, we will help 360,000 families displaced by conflict gain title to land and credit—boosting incomes and replacing swords with ploughshares.

Colombia, Nepal, and Senegal have each brought the rate of extreme poverty down so far and so fast that they can now envision fully eliminating it by the end of the next decade.

They are not alone.

Around the world, nations once defined by widespread poverty and endemic conflict are replacing human suffering with dignity and opportunity.
Today, six of the ten fastest growing nations are in Africa, and two-thirds of global growth will come from emerging markets.

During your careers, this underlying trend will mean that massive waves of capital, talent, creativity, and entrepreneurship from unlikely places will reshape the global landscape you are entering.

The impact of these trends on America’s security and prosperity is not preordained. It depends on our actions today.

Because let’s be honest: not every country looks like Nepal or Senegal or Colombia.

Not every community has leaders who believe in our values—in the inherent dignity of every human being. Or who stand strong against the forces of corruption, extremism, and kleptocracy.

Our goal to advance the cause of justice by ending extreme poverty has some fine print.

As more nations successfully end extreme poverty, the challenge before us will narrow—and toughen.

That’s why people are understandably skeptical.

That’s why a few of you may even find me naively optimistic when I suggest it.

Because you know that by 2020, extreme poverty will primarily become concentrated in countries like Haiti, the Philippines, and Bangladesh—where the rising tides and growing tempests of climate change exact pressure on the communities least able to cope.

In countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Yemen—where the hopefulness for peace and prosperity is every day undermined by extremism.
And in countries like Syria and South Sudan, where leaders who have a choice between perpetual conflict and lasting peace make the choice to fight.

Conflict is essentially development in reverse.

It destroys capital, scares away investment, displaces families, denies human dignity, and unravels the fabric of life.

In order to confront these realities, we need to recognize that development is fundamentally a political process, not a technical one.

We have not always thought this way.

Fifteen, ten, even five years ago, development professionals fought to keep their work insulated from politics.

But ending hunger does not just require new seeds. It requires leaders who reform the seed sector, give women ownership of the land they tend, and unlock local capital for underserved farmers.

Ensuring that every child has a light to read by at night doesn’t just require low-cost solar lanterns. It relies on leaders who build public-private partnerships that can attract investment and make large-scale power projects a reality.

And strengthening democracy doesn’t just mean monitoring elections, but empowering leaders who fight corruption, encourage women to vote, and protects the rights of minorities—even when it is more expedient to play on sectarian divisions.

Precisely because the Fletcher Mafia is so real, we know that you will have a great influence over how our leaders act and think.

If we are going to end extreme poverty by 2030, it will be your generation that takes it across the finish line. This is your moonshot. And we need you to lead.
Those of you who become ministers in your governments will need to prioritize the poor, fight corruption, and demand tough reforms.

Those of you who join the Foreign Service at State or USAID will need to focus relentlessly on data, accountability, and results.

Those of you who will become business leaders will need to take risks to deliver solutions not only for the urban middle class, but poor, rural communities.

But all of you—and this is harder than it sounds—will have to stay connected to the spirit of compassion and service that is so evident on campus this weekend.

As you go forward in your careers, you may find the greatest challenge is not only being a good leader in your field, but also in your life.

This is an area where I have been trying to get better myself. To listen more carefully. To hear all perspectives before making a decision. To find meaning in everyday tasks. To better support the people I love. And to say thank you.

I know there is more I can do to improve every interaction I have and create more room for my family and my colleagues to shine.

I have a leadership coach who asks me every day to send him a list of scores—1 through 10—on my progress. It’s a self-assessment—not of daily performance on these issues, but of whether I did my best to live up to my own standards.

It takes 2 minutes, and yet, every day, I instinctively try not to do it. Because it’s tough.

The reality is that you are the only person who can hold yourself to account. And when you do, you reap not only the rewards of professional accomplishments, but also those of being a stronger, better friend… son or daughter… or parent.
With a fine education and unparalleled network, you have an incredible path ahead of you. As you write the next chapter of human history, please nurture the sense of optimism and confidence that brought you to Fletcher. Remember that your lives have a calling and a purpose in service to each other.

And as you do, I promise your leadership will inspire new leaps of progress for generations to come.

Congratulations Fletcher Class of 2014!

I look forward to serving with you—and let’s be honest—probably for you one day. Thank you!