U.S. Air Force Academy
Fifty Years of
Developing Our Nation’s Leaders

This week, I had a wonderful opportunity to travel with a group of businessmen and women to visit the United States Air Force Academy, located on some 128,500 acres about midway between Denver and Colorado Springs. I came away totally impressed by the institution, its faculty and leaders, and its cadets.

The Academy experience is much more than most people might imagine. Lt. Gen. John Regni, a 1973 USAFA graduate and the Academy’s Superintendent, told us that while the Academy’s mission is to develop approximately 25 percent of the new officers the Air Force needs each year, the focus of the four-year cadet experience is not just military training. They try to develop the “whole person.”

Regni said it starts with character, which is “the sum of those qualities of moral excellence which compel a person to do the right thing despite pressures to the contrary.”

He described how, in addition to expected classroom and airmanship instruction (I learned that it costs $7 million to train a combat pilot!), the approximately 4,000 cadets face many challenges of responsibility, accountability, and decision-making authority through the assumption of important positions among their peers. Competitive athletics, strenuous physical activities, and team wilderness activities all instill desired traits such as teamwork, courage, aggressiveness, self-confidence, and an intense desire to win.

The academic training is of the highest quality. It is a good deal more demanding than at most other colleges. There is a good balance of science and engineering, along with social sciences and humanities.

Many publications do not rank the Academy against other colleges and universities because of its unique mission and program. However, several do. Forbes magazine recently ranked the Academy as 16th in the nation, just behind MIT and just ahead of Stanford University in its “America’s Best Colleges” report for 2008.

The number of cadets earning recognition by national and international scholarship programs this academic year alone is amazing.

- 35 have been selected as Rhodes Scholars
- 82 have been accepted as Guggenheim Fellows
- 115 have been awarded scholarships to Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government
- 151 have accepted MIT and Rice University scholarships

Cadets’ careers later in life are very diversified.

- 52 percent of the top officers in the Air Force are Academy graduates
- 403 Academy graduates have achieved the rank of general, including former Chiefs of Staff Ronald Fogelman and Michael Ryan and current Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, USAFA ’73
- 662 graduates have gone on to medical school
- Many took up careers in commercial aviation after serving in the Air Force; this includes US Airways pilot “Sully” Sullenberger, USAFA ’73, who recently saved 155 lives with his breathtaking emergency landing on New York’s Hudson River
- Countless other graduates have become presidents and chief executive officers of major corporations

The Air Force Academy was not an available option—it didn’t yet exist!—when I started college in 1951. I enrolled in Stanford University and became an Air Force ROTC cadet (after spending four years in Army ROTC in high school). After two years, when the Korean War ended, the Air Force needed fewer pilots, so I left ROTC to concentrate on getting into medical school. As I toured the Academy this week, I could not help wondering if I might have applied there if I had been born just a few years later.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the bill authorizing the Academy in 1954, and it graduated its first class in June 1959, just 50 years ago. Including that first class, more than 37,000 men and women have graduated from the Academy to date.

The Academy was closed to visitors right after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on the United States. It has recently again been accepting, indeed encouraging, visitors to its magnificent campus. If any reader of Saturday Briefing ever has the opportunity to see it, don’t pass it up. It is memorable and inspiring.