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ROTC Commissioning Ceremony

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on May 14, 2021

Location: NVRC, Tan Auditorium

Remarks: Remarks to the Class of 2021 Commissioning Cadets (Army & Air Force ROTC)

*The Chancellor was introduced by J. Michael Haynie,
Vice Chancellor for Strategic Initiatives and Innovation*

Welcome. Vice Chancellor Haynie invited me last week to meet with our about-to-be commissioned officers because our traditional ceremony in Hendricks Chapel, which I never missed, has had to be curtailed. At that ceremony, I briefly congratulated you and your loved ones on both your commissioning and your graduation. I asked Mike what he wanted me to discuss with you beyond congratulations. He told me I need to tell you about “why”—Why we built this spectacular Daniel and Gayle D’Aniello building. And, Why I care about this place being the best university for veterans and military connected students.

I can do that briefly. What my words will all add up to is a thank you to each of you for being here, and for what you have accomplished here. I am deeply grateful to you.

So, the “why.” I’m not a veteran. I was blessed to have a veteran father, who fought in World War II in the US Army Air Corps. He never talked about the war with me until shortly before he died. That generation was not big on talking about their wartime experiences. My father was in and out of medical trouble most of the years after the war, but he still managed to raise five kids and send us all through college. He was stationed in England and served in France, Belgium and Germany. I now possess all the photographs he helped take on D-Day. Toward the end of his life, I asked my father why he served. He said he enlisted because he loved his country, and he served because he loved his comrades (he said buddies).

I grew up to become a lawyer and then a law professor and a law school dean at very elite universities. I taught a lot of students. I always made it my job to get my students jobs. I discovered early on that I had an easy time placing veterans and military connected students, and that they invariably performed better at work than other students.

Before I took the job as Chancellor here, I was dean for eight years at Washington University in St. Louis. I discovered at that elite university that there were almost no veterans or military connected students there at all—something that also turned out to be the case across elite higher education in the U.S. That really stuck in my craw. It still greatly bothers me, as we wind up the longest war in our history. I had one student in my class at Washington University, a former army ROTC student gone on to JAG corps training. He had come to my law school after graduating from Princeton University, where he was the cadet battalion commander at Princeton during his senior year. I told him I was so impressed by the achievement, and he grimaced and told me it was not such a big deal—he led the battalion because he was the ONLY senior in the entire battalion who actually attended and one of only three Princeton ROTC students—everyone else in that squadron came from other small colleges in Southern and Central New Jersey. And then he told me he had never met a veteran in the student body over his four years at Princeton. I tell you there is something wrong with that picture, and with any elite university that today resembles it.

When I got to Syracuse in 2013, I was thrilled to find that we had both Army and Air Force ROTC, and that Mike Haynie had founded the first and best institute in the country dedicated to research and service to veterans and military families.

I also was thrilled to discover the history of ROTC here, a history that is captured on the walls outside in this building.

But I also discovered this University had a long way to go if it wanted to be the best for veteran and military connected students. Admissions and student services for veterans was a real bureaucracy. Financial Aid was impenetrable. The ROTC units were crammed into awful working space in an unrenovated and unairconditioned Archbold Gymnasium. There were a million other problems but, suffice it to say,

we did NOT have a University that our Institute of Veteran and Military Families could be entirely proud of.

So, I appointed Mike Haynie Vice Chancellor. He built a team both in IVMF and in the OVMA to increase veteran and military-connected enrollment and service—the team you have experienced. And we decided to build this building. We asked Dan D’Aniello to help make this possible. And like the great veteran and ROTC supporter he is, he stepped up and made all this possible. This building may look like an architectural wonder to you, but to me and Mike and Dan, it is a stake in the ground. It is a stake that says this University’s commitment to be the best for ROTC, the best for veterans, the best for service and research to the military-connected community, is going to last long after all of us have retired. And why is that important?

That is where the thanks comes in. In my humble view, Syracuse University is an incomparably better University, and better differentiated from its competitors, because students like you are here. Look at the last 18 months if you don’t believe me. How did most universities respond to Covid-19? Many curled up in a fetal position and decided to wait it out at home until covid went away—many of those elite universities I mentioned earlier still have not welcomed any significant number of students to campus even today, in May 2021. Other universities have recklessly charged into the minefield of Covid, failing to test students before they came back, and failing to inspire compliance with the public health steps needed to stay open.

But Syracuse University carefully and gingerly worked its way across that minefield all year, staying open and in person, without a single casualty in our students in Central New York all year. How did we do that?

You know a large part of the answer. Leadership. Leadership from Mike Haynie. Leadership from military connected staff. Leadership from you, who volunteered to make testing work and set an example that so many others followed.

You have helped get us through a global pandemic. And I will always be grateful. This is a better University because you have been here, and because Army and Air Force ROTC will stay here and stay strong as long as I have a breath in my body.

So thank you, and good luck in your service. Please come back and visit and remember always that you are forever Orange.

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