DGF ROTC Remarks
May 20, 2011
Tercentenary Theater

We honor and congratulate you today as you join a long and venerable tradition of Harvard soldier scholars. But this year marks a special anniversary in that long history. A hundred and fifty years ago this spring, your predecessors at Harvard faced national upheaval and a threat to the future of the republic that would cause more than 1300 Harvard alumni to take up arms. As Charles Russell Lowell, valedictorian of the College Class of 1854, explained, he knew that "somehow or other this fight was going to be one in which decent men ought to engage for the sake of humanity." Lowell would be killed in Virginia in 1864, the fate of one in every ten of those from Harvard who served in the Union Army. We still live with their memory and with their names—inscribed on the walls of Memorial Hall.

Lowell articulated a notion of service as the responsibility of "decent men" called to engage in a conflict about basic principles of humanity. He was willing to risk and ultimately to sacrifice his life to try to ensure a better world - - one in which slavery would perish and democracy—the "last best hope of earth," in Lincoln's words — could survive. And he recognized the obligation of those who had received the privilege of education to make their contribution to the greater good. His brother in law, Robert Gould Shaw, Harvard Class of 1860 commanded the

Massachusetts 54th, the first Black Regiment, and died with his troops at Fort Wagner. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Class of 1861, was wounded three times but survived to undertake another sort of public service — as a United States Supreme Court justice.

These are just three individuals who were part of a remarkable generation - -Holmes later described them as having been "touched by fire" — and they experienced extraordinary times, when many despaired about the very survival of the United States. We are not the first to live in an era of peril and crisis. With our country involved in conflicts at three sites around the globe, you as military officers have chosen to face very difficult challenges and to assume grave responsibilities. I hope that the knowledge, judgment and habits of mind you have developed here during these past four years will serve as a valuable resource, and I hope that your place in a long and newly invigorated Harvard tradition of military service and sacrifice supports and inspires you in the months and years to come.

Thank you for your service.

[You will now present each cadet with a copy of "Grant: Memoirs and Selected Letters."]