

President Drew Faust's Remarks at the ROTC Commissioning Ceremony

May 27, 2015

At the end of Commencement week exactly 150 years ago, a crowd assembled here in the Yard for a very special Harvard occasion—a commemoration of the end of four long years of Civil War. The day was to be a celebration of the sons of Harvard who had served and a solemn memorial to those who had died.

The program was lengthy—it lasted from early in the morning well into the evening. It was a day filled with speeches, banquets, and patriotic music. Massachusetts Hall, Harvard Hall, and University Hall were festooned with red, white, and blue bunting and flags, a golden eagle, and seals of the Commonwealth and the nation. A tent behind Hollis hosted a sumptuous dinner, and a parade of dignitaries and more than 250 student veterans marched across the Yard. Many who were still on active duty had been released for the day by a special dispensation from General Grant and Secretary of War Stanton. General George Meade, the victorious commander at Gettysburg, had received an honorary degree at Commencement two days before and now was honored again in a ceremony that included orations and presentations by some of Harvard's most distinguished luminaries. Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke, as did Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose son, later to become Justice Holmes, had been severely wounded in battle. The poet James Russell Lowell read a lengthy

poem composed for the occasion, and Julia Ward Howe, the author of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” also wrote a poem, but it was read by someone else, since it would have been unseemly for a lady to address a public gathering. Even Yale sent a representative to honor Harvard’s veterans and invited a Harvard representative to come to a similar event at Yale later that summer.

There are descriptions of boisterous cheering, stirring music, tables groaning with cold chicken, braised tongue, lobster salad, potted pigeons, an array of summer vegetables, pies, and ice cream. There are also descriptions of whisky, brandy, claret, champagne, sherry, and cider enhancing the festive air. This was a celebration of peace and of those who had won it, and a marking of Harvard’s role in preserving the nation. It was an acknowledgement of what we are here today to honor once again: the spirit of commitment and sacrifice embodied in military service and the contributions Harvard has made and will make to the national defense.

From the founding days of the nation, when George Washington’s troops bivouacked on that rise just over there and used my office as a hospital, Harvard has played a central part in America’s military traditions. Today we recognize your part in carrying on that legacy—your part in the long Crimson line.

It’s a very special place that you hold. One speaker at the 1865 commemoration mused on the connections between students and scholars, and the arts and practices of war. He observed that scholars are naturally “lovers of peace.” But he noted that between 1861 and 1865—and I quote

him again—“The members of the higher seminaries of learning throughout the land have been among the foremost to respond to the call of duty and patriotism. They have asked no exemption...pleaded no ineptitude for the hardships...of the soldiers’ lot.”

He continued, “Who else if not they? If the children of light [and learning] falter, who shall stand? If they hold back, who shall go forth?” Now these questions are posed in the stylized and florid language of another time. We are 150 years away from the day those words rang out in this very place. But their essential truth remains. “Who else if not they?” Who else if not we?

You have recognized that Harvard comes with both privileges and responsibilities. You, like the soldiers celebrated here as the Civil War came to a close, have chosen to serve your country as military officers, to assume the duties and dangers inherent in that role. Many of your classmates will serve society, the nation and the world in other ways. But we honor you in this ceremony for undertaking a special calling grounded in sacrifice, commitment and, yes, danger. We honor you for honoring the tradition of national service that Harvard has so long embraced. Now I am no Emerson, and I can offer neither claret nor champagne—nor potted pigeon or braised tongue. But I extend to you my congratulations. I offer you my thanks, on behalf of all of Harvard, for what you have already accomplished. And I offer you encouragement and appreciation for the work that lies ahead. Thank you very much.