Thank you, President McConnell, for the kind introduction.

Distinguished guests, members of the faculty, family, and friends, and most importantly, the class of 2016! Congratulations on your achievement!

Today marks only the second combined graduation...where The Graduate School, along with the Undergraduate School of the Arts; School of Professional Studies; and the School of Education, Health, and Human Performance culminate their years of hard work with this wonderful celebration.

Needless to say, it’s a great privilege to share this special day with you.

I’m the Secretary of the Air Force but first and foremost, I am a mom. So I understand how proud all the moms, fathers, grandparents, and guardians are—many of whom are with us today.

You would not be here without the unwavering love and support from your family and friends, so we also honor them today.

It’s always a treat to return to Charleston. I lived and worked here full time from 2007 to 2010 and served on the Advisory Board of the School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs...so I know this school well.

My husband, Frank, and I still own a home here, because we love the beautiful landscape, rich historical culture, and of course the people.

Charleston’s beauty is rivaled only by its history and tradition. From Fort Sumter to Rainbow Row, and from gourmet restaurants to sweetgrass baskets, Charleston is truly a world-class city.

Beauty abounds on this campus as well, but especially here, in Cistern Yard, with its ancient oaks and Spanish moss...

...and not to mention all of you, in your elegant white dresses and crisp dinner jackets! You really kick it up a notch!
You definitely have history: you’re the oldest college south of Virginia…and Randolph Hall, right behind me, maintains the oldest active classrooms in the United States.

And most importantly, you preserve tradition. For decades, freshmen have passed through the arch at Porters Lodge on their first day, and exited the Cistern yard by passing underneath the same arch.

Unless of course, you broke the cardinal rule and crossed the cistern early. Then you’ll just have to wait an extra year. If that’s you…sorry!

On the arch is a Greek inscription with two simple words...the same inscription that greeted visitors to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, in Ancient Greece.

The inscription reads: “Know Thyself”...a phrase that has challenged humankind for thousands of years.

Now, I can’t cover the Greek Classics in the same way a College of Charleston “Artium Baccalaureatus” does...

...so instead, I’ll give you my take on “knowing thyself”.

In my experience, knowing yourself comes down to three things:

- Know your purpose;
- Know your people; and
- Know your principles

Let’s start with knowing your purpose.

Take me for instance. When I was your age, I knew I wanted to do policy work in the government. I knew I wanted to work on issue and be part of a team where I could have a purpose so much bigger than just myself.

Specifically, I wanted to go into the Foreign Service. And then my dream went bust. Or so I thought. Here’s how it went down.

I grew up in New Jersey, went to Duke, and then onto Columbia, where I earned a Master’s degree in international affairs. And I did pretty well! I had top-notch grades, held several internships, and spoke fluent Spanish.

I moved to Washington and applied to the Foreign Service...and got turned down...this was devastating! After crying for three days straight!
I started applying elsewhere, and finally landed a job with the Army. It wasn’t my heart’s desire, but I was grateful for a job. And within a few months, remarkable things started happening:

- Great boss—who turned into a mentor
- Supportive colleagues
- Interesting work: I was serving the military and working in National Security.

And the opportunities that followed launched me on a 30-plus year career in defense.

I worked as an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs. I worked in industry, right here in Charleston, getting up-armored vehicles to our servicemen and women in Iraq and Afghanistan…and now I’m Secretary of the Air Force!

Although I didn’t end up in the Foreign Service—my purpose—to serve this great Nation—never changed.

And neither has yours. For the last four years…longer for those in the Graduate school…you’ve had a few purposes…to obtain a fantastic education, to grow intellectually, to think critically, to graduate, and prepare for the future.

Now, you’ll need to look inward again to find new goals, new direction…but maybe not new purpose. Maybe, like me, you had a dream…and you’ll devote all you have to achieving it.

Or, maybe your purpose is less defined. I’m here to tell you: that’s okay.

You may not have all the answers right now, but the College of Charleston has given you an educational and moral compass to help guide the next chapter of your lives.

As I mentioned, I wanted a career in service…it’s been the privilege of a lifetime to serve as Secretary of the Air Force…and I love being an Airman.

There’s no question in my mind the United States Air Force…and indeed…the entire Department of Defense…has some of the very best talent America has to offer.

Which brings me to my second point…to know yourself, you need to know your people. When you graduate, many of you will make decisions that will directly or indirectly affect the lives of others.

Eventually, most of you will become the leaders of others. This is a sacred responsibility. Knowing your people means having the ability to “walk a mile in their shoes”.
Let me give you an example:

The Air Force has over 660,000 Airmen. And during the last two and half years I've been on the job, I've done my best to know my people.

I do this by spending roughly half my time in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill, and the other half on the road—getting out to know our Airmen—here at home, overseas, and in combat.

I’ve traveled to 80 bases across 36 states and 31 countries, to include Iraq and Afghanistan, and I’ve listened closely to our Airmen’s stories.

Several recurring concerns emerged from these trips. One: We’re a busy Air Force...the busiest we’ve ever been. And we’re the smallest force in our history. Two: Airmen, especially women, struggled with work-life balance. Third: Our budget forced us to make tough choices, such as cutting Airmen, creating a vicious cycle...a small force shouldering significant strain.

I took action after hearing these concerns. I know what it’s like to juggle career and family...so we stopped downsizing our force. We changed family policies, setup opportunities for sabbaticals, and worked with Congress to boost funding, all designed to make the lives of our Airmen a little easier.

The lesson here is: whether you are in the military or in the private sector, knowing your people...knowing their concerns and challenges is critical. And doing something about it—working hard to serve them—is even more critical.

But to know your people, you have to earn their respect, and their trust. And it’s only by remaining steadfastly anchored to your principles that this can occur.

In the Air Force, our “principles” are known as our Core Values.

Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do. These Core Values...these principles...underpin everything we do in the United States Air Force.

College of Charleston students and graduates exhibit these same characteristics. When it comes to integrity, look to the example of John Charles Fremont, class of 1836, who went on to become a Union General and Governor of Arizona. Fremont issued a proclamation, in 1861, publicly opposing slavery, at a time when it would have been far easier to remain silent.

Fremont demonstrated integrity...and as you graduate, integrity must be your foundation. It will be the bedrock upon which everything else builds.

In terms of “service” there’s no shortage of “service before self” here at the College of Charleston. From the dance marathon you held earlier this year to benefit the Medical University of South
Carolina (MUSC) Children’s Hospital, to the numerous student volunteers and community projects, you already epitomize the spirit of service.

Service doesn’t always have to be something big. Sometimes it’s the smallest things...like a wave or a smile...that make the biggest difference. And if there’s one thing I know about Charleston, it’s that you’ve got southern charm in spades! Keep this up throughout your lives.

Last, but definitely not least, is “Excellence in All We Do”. The Air Force prides itself on being the greatest Air Force on the planet. We’re the greatest because of our Airmen...who strive to do their very best on every task, no matter how large or small, each and every day.

Since its founding in 1770, alumni of this institution have left their mark on the world. Alumni like Robert Mills, who studied here in the late 18th century—he designed the Washington Monument. Alumni like Anthony Johnson, class of 1998, who made his mark in the National Basketball Association. Graduates like Dr. Chantal Cousineau-Krieger, class of 2000, an Air Force ophthalmologist. Or Lauren Swing, class of 2011, who is now working as a Deputy Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives.

And then there’s the Class of 2016! I’m surrounded by excellence. I’m surrounded by young men and women who have spent the last few years of their lives dedicated to academic excellence.

You’ve excelled in college, and I have no doubt you’ll excel in life.

Which brings me full circle.

Your college journey started through Porters Lodge. And in a few moments, you’ll close this chapter through the same passageway.

As you pass beneath the arch, and into an exciting, dynamic world...may the power of your knowledge sustain your flight through life.

Know your purpose. Know your people. Know your principles.

Know thyself.

Congratulations, Class of 2016!

Thank you.