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As Prepared Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice at the Florida International University 2016 Commencement

National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice

**Commencement Address at Florida International
University**

**Steven J. Green School of International and Public
Affairs**

Wednesday, May 11, 2016

Disclosures

Good morning, FIU! Thank you, President Rosenberg. And, thanks Dean Stack and Provost Furton for letting me share this special day with you. Marcia, congratulations on your honorary degree.

I believe that a good commencement speech should be like a good commencement speaker—short. So, if I go on too long, Breezeway cookies for everyone on me. Deal?

First things first. To the SIPA Class of 2016—congratulations! *Felicidades*. You did it. You survived hurricanes and Professor Gil's math assignments. You juggled schoolwork and jobs. Somehow, against all odds, you even managed to find parking on campus. And, you did it all with hard work, grit, and more than a few *cafecitos* from Bustelo. I see some of you could use one right now.

Of course, it wasn't just caffeine that got you here. As a mom who's about to send her son off to college, I've got to give a lot of love to your incredible parents and families. They believed in you, sacrificed for you, and maybe even gave you a *nalgada* or two when it was necessary. So, let's hear it for your families!

I want you to revel in this special moment. Today is your graduation. But, it is also a reaffirmation of the American Dream—the embodiment of our founding ideals. In a world where great gaps persist between those with power and privilege and those without, education is still the great equalizer. No matter

where you come from, no matter what language you grew up speaking, this diploma is your passport to a future of possibility.

I've seen this in my own family. My mother's parents emigrated from Jamaica to Portland, Maine, in 1912. My grandfather was a janitor; my grandmother worked as a maid and a seamstress. Neither had much formal education, but they scrapped and saved and sent all five of their kids to college. My wonderful mom has devoted her career to expanding higher education opportunities for all. My beloved late father was born in segregated South Carolina. He was a Tuskegee Airman and, through sheer talent and willpower, rose to become an accomplished economist and a governor of the Federal Reserve. Because my parents refused to accept the limits society imposed — and because my grandfather bent over a broom — I stand here as the National Security Advisor to the President of the United States.

That is the incredible power and the enduring promise of this great country. It is the insistent tug of hope that has drawn generations of immigrants and refugees to our shores. "That notion," President Obama says, "that here, in this country, we can make of our lives what we will."

Now, there are voices out there that disparage our diversity—that question whether America should welcome people of all races, religions, and creeds. Those voices can be loud. They can be intimidating. They can make us feel like we don't belong. But, you

know what? Let fear be their problem, not yours. Shake it off. Ignore the haters. And, don't you dare let them slow you down.

Because here's the truth. What distinguishes us from so many other countries is not just the might of our military or the size of our economy. What sets us apart is our people. It's our innovation, our fearlessness, and our diversity. We see it in America's businesses, where many of our most successful companies were started or grown by immigrants—think Apple, created by Steve Jobs, the son of a Syrian immigrant from Homs. We see it in magnificent poets like Richard Blanco, a Cuban exile and two-time FIU alum, reminding us that we all live under "one sky."

And, we can see the profound importance of our diversity in the realm of foreign policy and national security.

To those who deride our diversity, my answer is: I see why it matters every day, in those who protect this country and grapple with the toughest global issues we face. I'm privileged to work with brilliant and dedicated professionals across our government. But we must acknowledge that our national security agencies have not yet drawn fully on the strengths of our great nation. Minorities still make up less than 20 percent of our senior diplomats. Less than 15 percent of senior military officers and senior intelligence officials. Too often, our national security workforce has been what former Florida Senator Bob

Graham called “white, male, and Yale.” In the halls of power, in the faces of our national security leaders, America is still not fully reflected.

Why should we care? For starters, a diverse national security workforce enables us to unlock all of our nation’s talent. There are some 320 million people in the United States. Nearly 40 percent are minorities, and an increasing number of them are earning college and graduate degrees. As America becomes more diverse, so do our best people. The next Colin Powell or Madeleine Albright or Bill Richardson is out there. Our country—and our policies—will be stronger if we can bring them on-board.

By now, we should all know the dangers of “groupthink,” where folks who are alike often think alike. By contrast, groups comprised of different people tend to question one another’s assumptions, draw on divergent perspectives and experiences, and yield better outcomes. Whether we’re confronting ISIL or Ebola, cybersecurity or climate change, solving today’s multifaceted global challenges demand more varied viewpoints and experiences than ever. Intelligence analysts, diplomats and military officers who are native speakers may pick up subtle nuances that might otherwise go unnoticed. Diplomats who can read cultural cues may better navigate the political and social currents of a foreign nation. In sum, leaders from diverse backgrounds can often come up with more creative insights, proffer alternative solutions, and thus make better decisions.

Moreover, we want our national security leaders to reflect America's best self to the world and inspire others to follow our example. Not by preaching pluralism and tolerance, but by practicing it. Think of the LGBT person in Bangladesh who knows that someone at the American embassy understands who she is. Think of the Iraqi soldier, learning to fight alongside Iraqis from other religious sects, who takes inspiration from America's own multi-ethnic force. Think of young Haitians drawn to converse with a Foreign Service officer who has dreadlocks like their own—or our Ambassador to India, Richard Verma, showered with rose petals when he visits his grandmother's ancestral home in Punjab. That is how we build bridges and deepen partnerships in an increasingly globalized world.

So, I'm not talking about a human resources issue. I'm highlighting a national security imperative. The presidential seal in the Oval Office and the Situation Room bears the inscription, "*E pluribus unum*"—out of many, we are one. That must always be the source of our success and our strength. Without tapping into America's full range of races, religions, ethnicities, language skills, and social and economic experiences, we're leading in a complex world with one hand tied behind our back.

President Obama feels strongly about the need to make our national security workforce more diverse. So do I and many other national security leaders. In 2011, the President signed an executive order prioritizing diversity and inclusion throughout the government. As I speak, we are pursuing ways to

recruit and retain more diverse national security talent.

But, we've got a long way to go, and that's where you come in. I know there are many career paths you could choose. For some of you, the first in your families to graduate from college, a lucrative job in law or business may be highly attractive.

But, your country needs you. We need the global approach you've honed at SIPA. We need your smarts, your skills, and, yes, the brilliant mosaic of experiences you carry with you.

You've competed on one of the best model UN teams in the country, now consider joining the real thing. You've documented the rise of the seas in Biscayne Bay, now help poor countries address the impacts of climate change. You've helped protect power plants from cyber attacks, so why not do the same for your government? In short, I'm asking you to serve your people. Put your higher education to a higher purpose. Help make "the 202" a little more like "the 305."

Yes, the hours are long and the workload can take its toll. But, if you care about your community, your country and the world, there is no work more rewarding, no field more exhilarating, no way to have a greater impact than public service.

In government, you may work around the clock to help negotiate a ceasefire in Syria. You can track terrorists and battle the spread of the Zika virus. You may miss dinner with your kids some nights to aid other children fleeing war-torn regions. But, for so many of us, this isn't just a job; it's a calling. It's the most rewarding work there is. That's what public service can be. That's what serving in national security can be. That's the incredible opportunity you have.

Look around you. Some of you may fight a war. Some of you may help end one. Some of you may bring power to dark corners of the world. Someday, one of you may be UN Ambassador or National Security Advisor or President of the United States. All of you, I hope, will contribute. All of you, I hope, will serve—at least during some part of your career.

Whatever you decide to do let me leave you with some quick pieces of advice. I may not look much like DJ Khaled, but consider these my own "Major Keys to Success."

First, always challenge yourselves. Get out of your comfort zone. After grad school, I was a management consultant at McKinsey and Company. I went there precisely because I was never any good at math and had literally never met a spreadsheet. It was good for me, and challenge will be good for you.

Second, travel the world. Learn more languages. Get

dust in your hair. FIU has taught you to think globally. Now, go immerse yourselves in the world. Pretty soon, the demands of adulthood will make bumming around Bangkok or Bogota a lot tougher.

Third, be fearless. It's hard to make progress without breaking a little crockery. So, don't sweat what others think of you. And, don't be afraid to go down fighting, if you're fighting a righteous battle.

Fourth, focus on what stirs your soul. It's tough to excel at anything you don't love. I hope some of you will pursue foreign affairs—but mostly I hope that you're passionate about whatever you choose.

Fifth, be about making change, not just counting it. I won't pretend that comfort and economic security don't matter, but they're not enough.

Sixth, be an example and mentor to others. Soon enough, you'll be in positions where people look up to you. Be generous about extending to others the support and opportunities you received.

Finally and most importantly, always put family first. Look at the faces of your loved ones—they will always be your foundation, and the source of life's greatest fulfillment. Someone can take your place in a meeting; but nobody can take your place as a loving child or devoted parent.

That's the little bit of wisdom I will offer today. Class of 2016, you have obliterated obstacles to make it to this day. You truly are "worlds ahead." I and so many of us are deeply proud of you. We can't wait to watch you build a brighter future for us all. Good luck—and may God bless you.



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