

At Naval Academy Graduation, Harris Focuses on Strengthening a ‘Fragile’ World

Vice President Kamala Harris, the school’s first female commencement speaker, used her speech to address some of the Biden administration’s most urgent challenges.



By Katie Rogers

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WASHINGTON — Vice President Kamala Harris achieved another first for women on Friday when she addressed the graduating class of the United States Naval Academy, becoming the first female commencement speaker in the school’s nearly 175-year history.

The vice president’s speech focused on some of the Biden administration’s most urgent challenges, like the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and a host of increasingly sophisticated cybersecurity threats — occurrences she called “warning shots” that would require a military trained to counter them.

“A gang of hackers can disrupt the fuel supply of a whole seaboard,” Ms. Harris said. “One country’s carbon emissions can threaten the sustainability of the whole earth. This, midshipmen, is the era we are in — and it is unlike any era that came before.”

The vice president’s speech at the Naval Academy, in Annapolis, Md., was her first to focus on the military, and it came as the Biden administration accelerated its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, well ahead of the Sept. 11 deadline President Biden set in April.

Ms. Harris has said that she was the last person in the room before the president made the decision to pull troops from the country, nearly two decades after they were first deployed.

Ms. Harris told the graduates that the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack had “shaped your entire life, and it shaped our entire nation.” She said that the pandemic had similarly redefined American life.

“If we weren’t clear before, we know now: The world is interconnected. Our world is interdependent. And our world is fragile.”

Presidents and vice presidents deliver commencement speeches to the different service academies on a rotating basis, and Ms. Harris was the first to return to the Naval Academy since President Donald J. Trump took the stage in 2018 and declared that, after his election, the United States was “respected again.”

While Mr. Trump was focused on the military earning the respect and fear of its global adversaries — he told the graduates in 2018 that the military was “the most powerful and rightful force on the planet” — the current administration has emphasized what Mr. Biden has said repeatedly: he believes that democracy is reaching an inflection point.

“No class gets to choose the world into which he graduates,” Mr. Biden told a class of Coast Guard graduates this month. “The challenges you’re going to face in your career are going to look very different than those who walked these halls before.”



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Ms. Harris's visit was meant to signal that the current White House's relationship with the military had changed since the Trump era, in ways that went beyond her speech: When she arrived in Annapolis, Ms. Harris laid flowers at the grave of Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican who, even after his death, was a frequent target of Mr. Trump's. Mr. McCain's widow, Cindy McCain, endorsed Mr. Biden in the 2020 election, and she is said to be under consideration for an ambassadorship to the World Food Program in Rome.

Ms. Harris also threw in a reference to the Biden administration's efforts to vaccinate young people: "You guys rolled up your sleeves and got vaccinated," she told the crowd of maskless graduates. "You made it to this day."

Ms. Harris, the first woman and person of color to be vice president, was not the only person who made history at the Naval Academy on Friday. Among the graduates at the commencement ceremony was be Midshipman First Class Sydney Barber, the first Black woman in the academy's history to serve as brigade commander.

Midshipman Barber, of Lake Forest, Ill., wears a distinctive set of six stripes on her uniform and was been responsible for much of the brigade's daily activities, as well as for the professional training of other midshipmen.

A pair of Midshipman Barber's shoulder boards are on display in Ms. Harris's ceremonial office, according to a senior aide to the vice president. Ms. Harris and the midshipman spoke recently on a private Zoom call and complimented each other on being the first Black women in their respective roles.

"You may be the first to do many things," Ms. Harris told the midshipman, according to an aide who recounted their conversation. "But make sure you're not the last."

It has been only 46 years since women were given permission to enroll in the service academies, and Midshipman Barber is the 16th woman to have served as brigade commander. The first was Midshipman Julianne Gallina, who led the brigade in fall 1991, when women were still prohibited from flying warplanes or serving on warships at sea. School records show that Ms. Gallina retired from the Navy as a commander.

"You are the idealists in the truest sense," Ms. Harris told the crowd. "You are the embodiment of American aspiration. So hold onto that."

John Ismay contributed reporting.