

Trump Speech to Bring 1,000 West Point Cadets Back to Campus

The president's off-again, on-again speech in June will bring back cadets who had scattered across the country to help counter the coronavirus.



By Eric Schmitt and Annie Karni

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WASHINGTON — For President Trump, who adores the pomp and precision of military ceremonies, this was the year he would finally get one of the special perks of being president — delivering the commencement address at West Point, the only service academy where he has not spoken.

But the graduation was postponed because of the coronavirus, the cadets were sent home and officials at the school were not sure when it would be held or even whether it was a good idea to hold it.

The Naval Academy, for its part, decided it was too risky to recall its nearly 1,000 graduating midshipmen to Annapolis, Md., for a commencement. Those graduates will have a virtual event. But the Air Force Academy, in contrast to the other schools, sent home its underclassmen, locked down its seniors on campus, moved up graduation, mandated social distancing — and went ahead with plans for Vice President Mike Pence to be its speaker.

And so last Friday, the day before Mr. Pence was to speak at the Air Force ceremony in Colorado, Mr. Trump, never one to be upstaged, abruptly announced that he would, in fact, be speaking at West Point.

That was news to everyone, including officials at West Point, according to three people involved with or briefed on the event. The academy had been looking at the option of a delayed presidential commencement in June, but had yet to complete any plans. With Mr. Trump's pre-emptive statement, they are now summoning 1,000 cadets scattered across the country to return to campus in New York, the state that is the center of the outbreak.

"He's the commander in chief, that's his call," said Sue Fulton, a West Point graduate and former chairwoman of the academy's Board of Visitors. "Cadets are certainly excited about the opportunity to have something like the classic graduation, standing together, flinging their hats in the air.

"But everyone is leery about bringing 1,000 cadets into the New York metropolitan area for a ceremony," she added. "It's definitely a risk."

Mr. Trump, like some of his predecessors, has used the annual commencement addresses at the country's military academies to promote his foreign policy successes and project strength, something he needs to do in the middle of a pandemic that has kept him in the White House in the middle of an election year.

There will never be a better setting for the president to talk up the size and abilities of the United States military, and point to the uniformed ranks in front of him as examples of the patriotic Americans he has enlisted to fight the coronavirus and carry out his campaign promise from 2016 of winning "so much you're going to get tired of winning."

Mr. Trump, who was so impressed by the Bastille Day parade he saw in Paris that he planned something similar in Washington until the Pentagon estimated its cost, basks in the glow of the spit-and-polish commencement ceremonies at the military academies.

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He spoke at Annapolis in 2018, and when he addressed the Air Force Academy graduation last year, the president stayed and shook hands with all 1,000 cadets. But it is West Point that holds special significance to Mr. Trump, aides said. A graduate of the New York Military Academy, he looks upon the West Point graduates serving in his administration with the same admiration he has for anyone with Ivy League credentials.

It had been a longstanding plan that the president would deliver the commencement speech there in late May, White House officials said, adding that after the event was postponed, they were still in talks with the academy about finding a new date.

White House officials said Mr. Trump left it up to the school to decide whether it was safe to hold a graduation ceremony in June, and pointed out that he could always reassess his decision closer to the date if the coronavirus crisis made it impossible for him to attend.

But his appearance at West Point, while not in any way unusual or unexpected, had yet to be announced.

Indeed, after all the West Point cadets were sent home for spring break in March, Lt. Gen. Darryl A. Williams, the West Point superintendent, ordered a working group there to draw up options — much like a battle campaign — for what to do about graduation, summer training and initiation day for incoming cadets.

One option included a delayed presidential commencement speech in mid-June, but nothing had been decided, academy officials said.

That is, nothing had been decided until last Friday, April 17, when, at a news conference, Mr. Trump was asked about Mr. Pence's coming trip to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Mr. Trump told reporters that he would be speaking at the West Point graduation in the near future, noting that he did not like the look of a socially distanced graduation and that he hoped the "look" of the ceremony would be "nice and tight." He did not announce a date for the event.

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West Point officials said this week that they were taken aback by the impromptu announcement. Of the many graduation options under review, Mr. Trump had pre-empted their planning.

A White House official said that the administration had been in discussions with West Point about a new date for the graduation, and that the academy had offered June 13 as a possibility.

On the morning of April 18, White House officials said, Mr. Trump had a discussion with the Defense Department, in which he confirmed that he would speak at West Point on June 13.

At a news conference later that day, Mr. Trump publicly announced the date for the first time. "I'm going to West Point. I think they're changing the date to June 13th because of what's going on in New York," he said. "They're moving into June 13th. West Point."

In a statement, a White House official said that "the president had spoken with D.O.D. and his remarks on that Saturday were not a surprise to the academy."

By Wednesday, the academy had caught up to the president's announcement. "We are honored to host the commander in chief as we celebrate the many accomplishments of our graduating class," General Williams said in a statement.

West Point officials say the size and scope of the ceremony will be determined "by safety considerations for cadets and the entire West Point community." Academy officials say they have not yet decided whether parents or other visitors will be allowed to attend.

General Williams said in a telephone interview that returning seniors would be tested off-campus for the coronavirus. Those who test negative will then be sent to the school, where they will be monitored for 14 days before graduation. While the campus has enough dormitory rooms for the 1,000 seniors, General Williams said that he was still deciding whether seniors would share bedrooms on their return.

"All 1,000 of them will not intermix," he said. "They'll be in their rooms. They'll have their masks on. Groups will be segregated in the mess hall when they eat."

Some faculty say this is not only inconvenient to cadets, but it is also a risk to their mental well-being. It has been an academic year marred by tragedy even before the outbreak. One cadet was killed and 21 others injured last June after a military vehicle overturned en route to a training exercise near the academy. In October, a cadet killed himself.

General Williams, who managed the initial stages of the American military response to the Ebola pandemic in Liberia in 2014, said that he was drawing from his experiences during that outbreak. He spent three weeks in quarantine in Italy after returning from Liberia during Ebola, and said he planned to use some of what he had learned during his own isolation to help returning West Point seniors.

"I'm not waiting for them to come back here to start worrying about their mental health," he said.

Since leaving campus in March, a handful of the academy's 4,400 cadets have tested positive for the coronavirus, and about 30 staff and faculty members have tested positive, said Lt. Col. Christopher Ophardt, an academy spokesman.

Graduating seniors, known as "firsties," would have had to come back at some point to take final exams, pack up their belongings and out-process, some said.

"If receiving their diploma and, most importantly, their commission with POTUS can top off that week, then my feeling is that all graduates would support it," said Michael J. Meese, a retired one-star Army general who taught at West Point and served on Mr. Trump's transition team, using the acronym for the president of the United States.

West Point still has to clear a few more hurdles to realize Mr. Trump's wish. The academy has asked Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper for waivers from a ban on travel for military personnel that runs through June 30, to allow cadets to return from all over the country.

And no one knows what twist the coronavirus could take in New York by June 13. West Point officials say they will follow the guidance from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Army.

"We'll go by what they all say at that time," said Colonel Ophardt, the academy spokesman.

Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Thom Shanker contributed reporting.

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