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**Commencement Remarks by Vivek Kundra
US Chief Information Officer
National Defense University, April 30, 2010**

Thank you Admiral Rondeau and Dr. Childs for inviting me to speak today. Let me begin by congratulating the 2010 National Defense University graduates. It's an honor to be here with you, to share this important milestone as you move into the next phase in your lives.

I appreciate and understand all too well the long hours, late nights, and weekends this year's graduates had to put in to get here today. I got a Masters degree while working full-time and I know how hard it is to balance competing demands on your schedules from excelling at your job, spending quality time with your loved ones, and carrying a demanding course-load. So let's extend a special thanks to the wives, husbands, parents, and children who made this journey possible through their support and countless sacrifices.

In his Inaugural Address, President Obama said: "what is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task."¹

To me, that is the essence of public service – a calling that I have followed and that you, too, have answered in your careers.

My journey in public service began at 8:30 in the morning on September 11, 2001. I was interviewing for the position of Director of Infrastructure Technology for Arlington County. In the middle of the interview, someone knocked on the door and said, "We've

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

entered a federal emergency.” I thought to myself, “What could I possibly have said in this interview!”

Immediately, we turned on CNN and saw the second plane fly into the World Trade Center. This was a turning point in my life, as it was for so many of us.

I accepted the position and started working right away to protect the people who protect us – our first responders. We had to make sure firefighters, police officers, and EMT officials were armed with the technologies they needed when they went into harm’s way.

Within a month of September 11th, the Senate Hart building was shut down because of an anthrax scare. Immediately, we had to consider the possibility of running the government virtually, leveraging the power of technology to ensure continuity of operations.

Since then, I have been honored to serve Governor Tim Kaine as the Assistant Secretary of Commerce and Technology for the Commonwealth of Virginia; Mayor Adrian Fenty as the Chief Technology Officer of the District of Columbia; and now President Barack Obama as the nation’s first Chief Information Officer.

Throughout my career, I have seen the profound impact public servants have on the lives of others. And I am sure like many of you; my commitment to public service is rooted in my own American story.

My story is an improbable one. I was born in New Delhi, India, and lived in Tanzania until I was eleven. I came to America in 1985, when my parents decided to move to a land of unlimited opportunity built on the premise that all men are created equal.

I spoke only Swahili and Hindi when I first arrived. I recall my first days at school in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and seeing a couple of kids around my age who reminded me of my friends in Tanzania. When I walked up to them and started speaking Swahili, I was promptly met by strange looks, so I started speaking even louder to make sure they understood me. I suspect they thought I was making fun of them because the next thing I knew, I was being beaten up.

Eventually, I learned English by watching “Three’s Company” and taking English as a Second Language classes until the ninth grade. But I was fortunate to have access to a good public education and to live in a country where anything is possible if you work hard.

For me, public service is a way to give back to a country that has given me so much. Every person in this country has known its freedoms and opportunities. Etched into our nation’s DNA are the beliefs that we can dream big and take bold steps, that we all have the ability to shape our own destinies and that our hard work and ingenuity are valued.

Only in America could a college student turn a term paper into a global shipping company called Federal Express. Only in America could two engineers tinkering in their garage end up building a world-class technology company like Hewlett-Packard. Only in America could two brothers on a beach in North Carolina give birth to the aviation industry.

Your graduation today is an important milestone—not just for you, but also for our country. We need our best and brightest in public service to meet the pressing challenges our nation faces today and to seize the unique opportunities we face at this critical juncture in history.

The economy is still recovering from the worst economic crisis in decades, which shut factories and closed businesses, leaving millions without jobs and families struggling to make mortgage payments and put food on the table.

The global shift to a knowledge economy and advances in technology are placing a premium on an educated workforce with skills to compete in the global economy.

The nation’s security and economic prosperity must be protected against new and emerging threats, such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism and cyber warfare, while we continue to fight two wars overseas.

To meet these challenges, to seize these opportunities, we need dedicated public servants like you. You have crossed a threshold of education that few in the world will

ever achieve. You have proved that you are capable of excelling and rising to meet the demands of today's ever-complicated world.

I stand here inspired by your commitment to public service and willingness to dedicate your life to the greater good. Now more than ever, this nation needs you. In my own journey from Arlington County to the White House, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges and threats this nation faces. But I have also seen the opportunities and possibilities that only America can provide. It is our responsibility and sacred duty to make sure those opportunities and possibilities are there for every American.

We live in an age in which technology plays a central role in shaping world affairs. From the mobile giving response to the Haiti earthquake which generated \$35 million via text messaging to the global movement democratizing data on every aspect of government operations. We are in the midst of the Information Revolution. In the same way the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions fundamentally and permanently transformed society, so too is the Information Revolution reshaping the world today. Technology is constantly evolving and as a government, we are behind the curve.

The task before us is a daunting one – we have to build the government of the 21st century that will deliver services critical for the defense of our nation and the shared aspirations of our society, whether it is affordable healthcare, world-class schools or economic prosperity.

You are now armed with the knowledge and skills to help move the country forward. With the aid of your talent, hard work and dedication to public service, we will help define the 21st century.

I congratulate you again on your achievements and your service to our country.