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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
RESERVE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL

9:46 P.M. EST

Mr. Chairman, General Sorensen, distinguished Members of the Congress, members of the Executive, fellow members of ROA, this is a very high point in my career of public service.

I, of course, am extremely proud of the award that Senator Stennis has read, but as I look at the names of those who have been previous winners, I feel very humble in their company. They have been men of great strength, great wisdom, tremendous dedication. They were big leaguers in every sense of the word, and to be a part of that group is a great honor. And I am deeply grateful and most thankful.

Thank you very much, General Sorensen.

I am especially grateful for this high honor because of the boundless respect and admiration I have always had for the members of the Reserve Officers Association. The ROA has never lost sight of a strong and secure America -- a Nation that stands steady, because it stands ready. In the fullest capacity I can, I pledge to you that I will always stand shoulder to shoulder with the men and women here tonight who have helped to make this strength a reality.

As a member of the ROA, I want you to know how delighted I am to be here, to renew old friendships and to recall so many happy memories.

Let me ask this question: tell me, has this ever really happened to you? Before coming here tonight, I started **reminiscing** about my active service some years ago. I was telling my very dear wife, Betty, how our ship won the war in the Pacific. (Laughter.)

I have told her that quite a few times, and she still does not believe me. I got a little nostalgic, and then, I made a tactical error. I tried to put on my old Navy **uniform**. (Laughter.)

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(OVER)

Have you noticed how something happens to those old uniforms when you keep them in the closet too long? They start to shrink, particularly around the middle. Well, it took me five minutes to get into the coat and, then, ten minutes to get into the pants. Incidentally, some of my critics might be interested to know the cap I put on still fits. (Laughter.)

I will tell you what finally changed my mind about wearing my blues tonight. Betty came over, took one look, and believe me, there is nothing more embarrassing than having your wife tell you to pull in your stomach when you already have. (Laughter.)

I think it is especially fitting this evening to recall the words and the deeds of the Father of our Country; 243 years ago tomorrow, at Wakefield, on Pope's Creek, in Westmoreland County, in the great State of Virginia, George Washington was born. America esteems George Washington because he was not only our first President, but, as ROA has noted, he was our first Reserve Officer as well.

Washington's qualities as a military man and the builder of peace personified the finest dimensions of American character. Yes, George Washington still lives in the spirit of men and women of organizations like ROA.

As General and later as President, he faced great challenges and seemingly insurmountable odds. The Congress he served as the Continental Army's Commander-in-Chief lacked decisive leadership. Inflation was rampant. Funds to equip the Army were extremely short. Washington's troops even went without pay. Supply problems were incredible. Britain ruled the seas. Washington was forced to retreat from one battle to another for much of the war -- to fight another day. But he won the last battle, which is, of course, the one that counts.

I think that is why Washington lives: his iron will, his dignity, his personal example -- to the patriots of his day and of ours. In fact, this plain patriotism marked him for immortality. His incredible perseverance and tenacious endurance assured our independence.

Today, we are called upon to exhibit that same spirit, which carried Washington and his Nation through some of its darkest days. It is imperative that we maintain a world-wide military balance -- yet, by some, we are being told that the price that is asked is too high.

Since I am speaking of defense and the cost for that preparedness, let me say a word about the Defense budget. As a result of Congressional actions and inflation, defense spending in 1976 -- measured in real terms -- will be more than one-third below the peak Vietnam War level and about 20 percent below the pre-Vietnam level.

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As a percentage of total government spending -- that is, Federal, State and local -- real defense outlays amount to about 17 percent, the lowest proportion since 1950 -- 25 years ago. Since fiscal year 1968, the active duty strength of the Army has been cut in half. Our Navy will drop below 500 ships in the active fleet in the next fiscal year -- the lowest level in more than 30 some years.

I hope that we will tell these facts to our friends and neighbors all over the country because unfortunately too many of those that we live with in our respective communities don't know the facts -- they are fed a propaganda line that sounds good superficially but in truth could undercut our national security today and in the future.

It may not be a popular line to speak up on behalf of because of the propaganda that comes from other sources, but you're right and if you continue to speak with the facts as they are -- and they are available -- time will prove that you did much to save our country in the months and years ahead.

Let me say at this point that I, like all of you, believe in peace. I, like I suspect all of you, believe in detente and I believe that both peace and detente are dependent on a strong defense.

Therefore, I, like all of you, am determined to maintain that military strength. That is why I, as well as you, consider the \$92.8 million in defense spending which has been requested in fiscal year 1976 a basic minimum to assure the security of this nation in an insecure world.

To your good friends -- whose motives I don't challenge -- who tell us that we must substantially cut the cost of defense must also, to be honest and frank with all of us, acknowledge the risk involved. The declaration which our forefathers signed in 1776 launched the independence of this great nation. And I will tell you this tonight: I, like you, will not sign any declaration of dependence and inferiority.

Not all good men agree on goodness. Not all just men agree on justice. But all free men agree that freedom requires sacrifice. It is costly -- we must be willing to pay its full price.

Over the past 200 years the American people have willingly paid the full price of freedom. I promise you that I, like you, will never turn our backs on defense because we all remember when it saved freedom. I will never accept -- nor will you -- second best in defense nor will I ever, like you, reject my full commitment to our armed forces and our solemn duty to the American people.

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Without strength we can have no freedom. Without freedom we can have no peace. But with strength we can have a world in which our children and our grandchildren can live both in freedom and in peace.

As a Reserve Officer, like most of you here tonight -- or as a former Reserve Officer -- I am aware of the dedication of each of you to the uniform in which you serve or did serve. Even more, I am fully aware of your patriotism and allegiance to our country. You and the men and women who serve so loyally in our armed forces deserve the highest accolades that this nation can pay you. As you have in the past, I know that each and every one of you will continue to provide that vital backup role that you have always played as an integral part of our defense establishment and posture. I thank you for this contribution which has been so significant over the years.

Let me conclude with this final observation, if I might. Of his many titles -- President, General, revolutionary leader, colonial hero, Father of our Country -- George Washington cherished most the very simple description of being a free man. In that spirit I accept the high honor that you have bestowed on me this evening with the deepest gratitude and the most profound appreciation. I accept it and will do my very best to be faithful to its ideals.

Thank you very much.

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(AT 10:02 P.M. EST)