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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE
RESERVE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL

I am particularly 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 the goal of a strong and secure America -- a nation that stands steady, because it stands ready. And I pledge to you that I will always stand shoulder to shoulder with the men and women here tonight who have made this strength a reality.

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

It is especially fitting this evening to recall the words and deeds of the father of our country. Two hundred and forty-three years ago tomorrow -- at Wakefield on Pope's Creek in Westmoreland County, 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 a builder of peace personify the finest dimensions of the American character.

Yes, George Washington still lives -- in the spirit of the men and women of organizations like the ROA.

As General and later 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 often 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 the one that counts.

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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 the same spirit -- which carried Washington and this nation through some of its darkest days. It is imperative that we maintain a world-wide military balance -- yet we are being told that the price that is asked is too high.

Since I am speaking of defense, let me say a word about the Defense budget.

As a result of Congressional cuts and inflation, defense spending in 1976 -- measured in real terms -- will be more than one-third below the peak Vietnam war level and about twenty percent below the pre-Vietnam level.

As a percentage of total government spending -- that is federal, state, and local -- real defense outlays amount to about seventeen percent, the lowest proportion since 1950. Since fiscal year 1968, the active duty strength of the Army has been cut in half. Our Navy will drop below five hundred ships in the active fleet in the next fiscal year. That is the lowest level in more than thirty-five years.

I believe in peace. I believe in detente. And I believe that both peace and detente are dependent on a strong defense. Therefore, I am determined to maintain our military strength.

That is why I consider the ninety-two point eight billion dollars in defense spending -- which I have requested for fiscal 1976 -- a basic minimum to assure the security of this nation in an insecure world.

Those who tell us that we must substantially cut the cost of defense must also acknowledge the risk involved.

The Declaration which our forefathers signed in 1776 launched the independence of this nation. I will tell you this tonight: I am not going to 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 two hundred years, the American people have willingly paid the full price of freedom.

I promise you that I will never turn my back on defense because I remember when it saved freedom. I will never accept second best in defense nor will I ever reject my full commitment to our armed forces and my solemn duty to the American people.

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 grandchildren can live in freedom and peace.

As a former Reserve Officer myself, I am aware of the dedication of each of you to the uniform in which once you served. Even more, I am aware of your patriotism and allegiance to our country. You and the men and women who served and now serve so loyally in our armed forces deserve the highest accolades the nation can pay you.

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As you have in the past, I know that you will continue to provide the vital backup role you always have as an integral part of our defense posture.

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

Good evening and thank you.

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