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Office of the White House Press Secretary
-----THE WHITE HOUSETEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE
NATIONAL BICENTENNIAL CONFERENCE

I am very pleased to join you this morning to launch this important conference of representatives from the Federal Government, the State Bicentennial Commissions and the staff of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration.

All of you have already contributed thousands of hours of work preparing for events during the next 22 months. Your dedication will make this Bicentennial season into a profound renewal for America. Your sense of having participated will be your best reward.

This group comes from many occupations and many different parts of the Nation. You reflect what I find most exciting about the Bicentennial activities -- they flow from the spirit of all our people -- they are truly national in scope -- and truly non-partisan. The Bicentennial involves all sections of the country and yet represents a unity of purpose.

Over 6,000 projects are now planned, with more being added every month. They demonstrate the diversity of our national heritage --- and the imagination of our citizens.

There are beautification programs... restoration projects... educational efforts... and medical research -- all under the Bicentennial banner.

In New York City, the South Street Seaport with a museum and rejuvenated sailing ships will commemorate the Bicentennial.

Third graders in Riceville, Iowa, sold cookies and Christmas tags to finance a Bicentennial mini-park.

And in the Texas towns of Howardswick, Clarendon and Hedley, a community Bicentennial amphitheater is being built of bricks hand-made by the school children of those towns.

These projects show there is not just one way -- but many, many ways to observe the Nation's 200th birthday. I remember as a boy being taught that the beauty of Joseph's coat was its many colors.

Just as the strength of the nation comes from the richness of many different ideas ... so does the strength of the Bicentennial.

This celebration period is an important opportunity for this nation to reflect on the past... and even more to look to the future.

John Adams envisioned the celebration of the Declaration of Independence in a letter to his wife, Abigail, in July, 1776: He wrote:

"I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore."

(MORE)

John Adams, who would later be the first Vice President and the second President of the United States, did not know then what the outcome of the Declaration of Independence would be...nor did he realize that the day would come when the United States would stretch across the continent and across distant seas.

But like other Revolutionary leaders, he had faith in the future of the unformed Nation.

Those were exciting...frustrating...and confusing times.

Letters and newspapers were carried by horseback...or by ship. But the ferment of the ideas was strong enough to overcome the limited means of communication.

The Continental Congress, composed of representatives from different states oftentimes with conflicting interests, faced the job of agreeing long enough to fight a war...with limited funds and manpower.

It was a tough job...because it is always difficult to unite clashing demands. But the job was done...the Revolution was successful...and a unique Constitution was written. Those Americans did not fail us.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote Lafayette: "We are not to except to be translated from despotism to liberty in a featherbed."

And the Americans who inherited the new form of government knew what Jefferson meant. They did not fail us.

We are here today because no ensuing generation of Americans found self-government to be a "featherbed."

Now as we commemorate the deeds of the first citizens of the Nation, we must look as they did to the future. We must ask ourselves what we will leave to the next generation.

What will America be in another two hundred years? It is almost beyond our ability to foresee.

Jefferson...Franklin...Washington and others could not know what their efforts would produce. Neither can we.

But we can act to honor our highest obligation to leave the Nation free and secure -- as it has been passed down to us.

Each generation has been called on to accept the challenge of a different crisis. And each generation lived up to its responsibility.

In 1812, our young Nation faced its first war: another struggle with Britain. The Capitol and the White House were burned...and President Madison and his wife Dolly fled the city. But the fledgling Nation pulled itself together and survived. The Capitol and the White House were rebuilt...the country continued to grow. Those Americans did not fail us.

When the debate over slavery and union erupted into a War . . . Americans fought Americans. But the end of the war brought renewal... and the task of settling the continent went on. Those Americans did not fail us.

When a great crisis of spirit...caused by the Depression struck the Nation... millions of Americans living today did not fail us. They pulled themselves together and kept the Nation going.

(MORE)

In two World Wars, Americans gave their time...talent...resources...and many, their lives, to keep the cause of freedom alive. They did not fail us.

In unhappy times and unpopular wars, Americans accept the challenge. No generation of Americans has failed to accept the necessary sacrifices of the day. I am convinced we will not fail ourselves or future generations.

Today, we again face challenges -- our economic and energy problems. New perceptions and new priorities are required to meet new difficulties.

We are engaged in a great national debate over how to solve economic and energy problems of very serious proportions. Solutions will require the same hard work and tenacity required to wage a successful Revolution, establish a working government, carve a civilization out of wilderness, produce the greatest industrial machine ever and develop the highest standard of living in any nation in the world.

In another two hundred years, in 2175 Americans will prepare to celebrate the Nation's four hundredth birthday. We must act now so . . . that they can say of us: "Americans in the 1970's did not fail us."

We can remember the past with flags and parades and fireworks as President Adams envisioned in the first summer of Independence. But to honor the past, we must hand this magnificent experiment in self-government on to future generations, free and strong.

As we prepare for our Bicentennial, we must join together to make sure that America's past is truly the prologue to a greater future. We must not fail. We will succeed.

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