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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
OLD NORTH CHURCH

8:25 P.M. EDT

Bishop, Vicar, dear friends:

Two hundred years ago tonight two lanterns hung in the belfry of this Old North Church. Those lanterns signaled patriots on the other side of the Charles River British troops were moving by water.

As Longfellow said in his poem: "One if by land and two if by sea."

Paul Revere, William Dawes and Samuel Prescott rode into the night, alerting the colonists the British were coming. When day broke, according to the diaries of the time, the sky was clear and blue. British troops had crossed the Charles River.

They marched all night, and after a skirmish at Lexington, the Redcoats arrived at Concord. There a volley was fired by our Minutemen, what Emerson called "The shot heard round the world." The American war for independence had begun.

Tonight, we stand in tribute to those who stood for liberty and for us two centuries ago. Tonight, we bow our heads in memory of those who gave their lives, their lands, their property for us during that historic struggle because tonight we begin as a Nation and as a people the celebration of our Bicentennial.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian, wrote of our beginnings: "In that land, the great experiment was to be made, by civilized men, of the attempt to construct society on a new basis."

Over the decades, there were challenges to that experiment. Could a nation half slave and half free survive? Could a society with such a mixture of peoples and races and religions succeed? Would the new nation be swallowed up in the materialism of its own well being?

The answers are found in the history of our land and our people. It is said that a national character is shaped by the interplay of inheritance, environment and historical experience.

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Our inheritance is basically that of Western Europe. From the English we received the tradition of liberty, laws, language and customs.

The American inheritance has been constantly enriched by people from Western and Eastern Europe, from Asia, and Africa, as well as Latin America and many other parts of this great globe.

Over 200 years some 50 million emigrants have been absorbed in our society. Though our national origins are not forgotten, all of us are proud to be simply called Americans.

Our environment includes every variety of climate, soil and resources. The American historical experience has been brief compared to many, many other nations. We are the new world, but we are the world's oldest republic.

The most distinguished characteristics of our American way is our individualism. It is reflected in our frontier spirit, our private enterprise and our ability to organize and to produce.

Our ability to adopt new ideas and to adapt them to practical purposes is also strikingly American. But now we ask ourselves, how did we come to be where we are tonight? The answer is found in the history of the American experience. It teaches us that the American experience has been more of reason than of revolution, more of principles than passions and more of hope than hostilities or despair.

But our history is also one of paradox. It has shown us that reason is not without its moments of rebellion, that principles are not without passion and hope is not without its hours of discouragement and dismay.

It is well to recall this evening that America was born of both promise and protest: The promise of religious and civil liberties and protest for representation and against repression.

Some of our dreams have at times turned to disappointment and disillusionment, but adversity has also driven Americans to greater heights.

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George Washington marched from the anguish of Valley Forge to the acclaim of final victory. Reason and hope were the twin lanterns of Washington's life. They enabled him to prevail over the day-to-day doubts and defeats. They have been the lamps that have lighted the road of America toward its ultimate goals -- dignity and yes, self-fulfillment -- and pride in country.

Abraham Lincoln was a man of reason and a man of hope. He acknowledged the grave flaw of our first 87 years -- slavery.

Over 110 years ago, the American Civil War ended with our Republic battered and divided. Many people talked more of survival than of union. One-half of the Nation was on its knees in ruin. Nearly 2 million had been killed and wounded. The war had uprooted the lives and the fortunes of millions more.

Its end was marked by more tears than cheers. But it was also the birth of a new Nation freeing itself from human slavery. Just before the war ended on March 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln stood on the East Portico of the Capitol in Washington and delivered his second inaugural address.

He extended the hand of friendship and unity when he said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the Nation's wounds."

President Lincoln had relit the lamps of reason and the lamps of hope. He had rekindled pride in America.

Over 100 years ago, as the Nation celebrated its centennial, America looked to the future. Our Nation had emerged from an agricultural frontier society into an industrial age. Our towns were beginning to evolve into the cities of the 20th century. Rail transportation and the telegraph were tying this vast continent together.

When we celebrated our 100th birthday, one of the themes was: "While proud of what we have done, we regret that we have not done more."

There was certainly more to do and more people to do the job. Immigrants were pouring into America. They were welcomed by these words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The great increase in the number of Americans, may I say, made us a formidable force in the world. That force was soon needed. World War I saw American troops fight and die in Europe for the first time.

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Many Americans were disappointed and disillusioned by the aftermath of the war. They found the causes for which they fought unachieved.

The American people rejected foreign entanglements and withdrew into a separate existence. They wanted to be left alone.

In 1941, the United States was attacked and once more we went to war. This time across the Pacific as well as the Atlantic. We were proud of this country and what it was achieving for liberty around the world.

Yet, still another time, following victory over our enemies, the American public was jarred and disillusioned by the postwar years. They discovered there would be no real peace. Europe was divided in two on V-E Day.

In the words of Churchill, "An iron curtain has descended across the continent." America had become the stronghold of liberty.

President Truman instituted a bipartisan foreign policy of containment, cooperation and reconstruction. The Marshall Plan moved to reconstruct a free world. The United Nations was born but the cold war had already begun. Soon-- all too soon--America was again at war under the banner of the United Nations in Korea.

Little did we know then that American troops would only a decade later be fighting in still another war in Asia, culminating in a broken peace agreement in Vietnam.

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- In the two hundred years of our existence, it is not war and disillusionment which have triumphed. No. It is the American concept and fulfillment of liberty that have truly revolutionized the world. America has not sought the conquest of territory but instead the mutual support of all men and women who cherish freedom.

The Declaration of Independence has won the minds, it has won the hearts of this world beyond the dreams of any revolutionary who has ever lived. The two lanterns of the Old North Church have fired a torch of freedom that has been carried to the ends of the world.

As we launch this Bicentennial celebration, we Americans must remind ourselves of the eternal truths by which we live. We must be re-inspired by the great ideals that created our country. We must renew ourselves as a people and rededicate this nation to the principles of two centuries ago.

We must revitalize the pride in America that has carried us from some of our darkest hours to our brightest days.

We must once again become masters of our own destiny. This calls for patience, for understanding, for tolerance and work toward unity -- unity of purpose, a unity based on reason, a unity based on hope.

This call is not new. It is as old as the Continental Congress of two hundred years ago, as legendary as Lincoln's legacy of more than one hundred years ago, and as relevant as today's call to Americans to join in the celebration of the Bicentennial.

Perhaps national unity is an impossible dream. Like permanent peace, perhaps it will prove to be a never-ending search. But today we celebrate the most impossible dream of our history, the survival of the Government and the permanence of our principles of our founding fathers.

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America and its principles have not only survived, but flourished far beyond anyone's dreams. No nation in history has undertaken the enormous enterprises of the American people. No country, despite our imperfections, has done more to bring economic and social justice to its people and to the world.

Yet, we have suffered great internal turmoil and torment in recent years. Nevertheless, in all the explosive changes of this and past generations, the American people have demonstrated a rich reserve of reason and hope.

There are few times in our history when the American people have spoken with more eloquent reason and hope than during the tribulations and tests that our Government and our economic system have endured during the past year. Yet, the American people have stood firm.

The Nation has not been torn with irresponsible reaction. Rather, we are blessed with patience, common sense and a willingness to work things out. The American dream is not dead. It simply has yet to be fulfilled.

In the economy and energy and the environment, in housing, transportation, in education and communication, in social problems and social planning, America has yet to realize its greatest contribution to civilization.

To do this, America needs new ideas and new efforts from our people. Each of us, of every color, of every creed, are part of our country, and must be willing to build not only a new and better Nation, but new and greater understanding and unity among our people.

Let us not only be a Nation of peace, but let us foster peace among all nations. Let us not only believe in equality, but live it each day in our lives. Let us not only feed and clothe a healthy America, but let us lend a hand to others struggling for self-fulfillment.

Let us seek even greater knowledge and offer the enlightenment of our endeavors to the educational and scientific community throughout the world. Let us seek the spiritual enrichment of our people more than material gains.

Let us be true to ourselves, to our heritage and to our homelands, and we will never then be false to any people or to any nation.

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Finally, let us pray here in the Old North Church tonight that those who follow 100 years or 200 years from now may look back at us and say:

We were a society which combined reason with liberty and hope with freedom.

May it be said above all: We kept the faith. Freedom flourished. Liberty lived.

These are the abiding principles of our past and the greatest promise of our future.

Good evening, and may God bless you all.

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(AT 8:45 P.M. EDT)