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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION

HENRY W. KIEL AUDITORIUM

1:55 P.M. CDT

Dr. Jackson, Dr. Burson and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

At the outset, let me congratulate Dr. Jackson on his birthday yesterday, and the fact that he was re-elected president for the 22nd time.

I have got a long way to go, Doctor. (Laughter)

It is a very great privilege and pleasure for me to be here today before one of the strongest and most important institutions in our society -- the Church.

As you know, it was freedom -- religious freedom -- that inspired many of our early settlers to come to these faraway shores to found our Nation. All of us can be very proud, despite the imperfections of our country, that we have never reversed the goals of our Founding Fathers. Dr. Martin Luther King was able to stand before this Nation and the world -- despite our country's travail -- and still say, "I have a dream."

The dream of blacks in America actually began long before our Declaration of Independence. History tells us that blacks were American pilgrims as well as pioneers. As many as 20 blacks came ashore at Jamestown in 1619, just 12 years after the first settlers arrived.

In Boston today the Crispus Attucks' monument stands proudly as a tribute to a black man who died leading a protest against the British six years before our Declaration of Independence.

As early as 1770 your Baptist faith began to take a foothold in America. At that time, blacks were organizing Baptist State conventions in our various colonies.

Through the years religion has always been a very important force in American life. It has been one of the pillars of black communities, as witness to your faith in God and all that is right.

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As we look back on some of the shortcomings of America, slavery leaves a sad and sorry chapter in our history. But a powerful belief in God enabled many blacks to endure those dark and dreary and sad days and years.

As we begin to celebrate the Bicentennial of our Nation, we have another historic triumph to celebrate -- our victory over that tragic injustice -- where all of God's people walk free in the light of a new day.

Equality, in the true spirit of our Founding Fathers, is not yet a full reality for all Americans. I am sorry to say that. Minorities and women still do not participate equally in employment. They do not share many economic, social and other resources of our Nation. Yet the struggle goes on. And it must continue until the vision of our Founding Fathers and the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Jackson and others have become a reality.

Who will ever forget Dr. George Washington Carver and his experiments with the peanut and the sweet potato, which were the basis for more than 400 different products? Or Lewis Latimer, the son of a runaway slave, who invented the first incandescent electric light bulb with a carbon filament, and who also helped Alexander Graham Bell develop the telephone? Or Dr. Charles Drew, who developed the apparatus for preserving blood plasma?

In the field of politics, progress has been slow but today there are more than 3,500 black elected officials in the United States, including 135 mayors, and those numbers are increasing every year. There will be more and more and more. And, of course, they will be solid, splendid national leaders like Senator Ed Brooke and others in the Congress, providing the dedicated leadership that our country needs now and in the future.

History has not recorded accurately the countless contributions made by blacks to America. Yet times are changing as we begin our Bicentennial celebration.

As President, I wish to help bring about this change by recalling some vitally important black contributions to our history.

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The right to vote is the cornerstone of our democracy. I was proud to have been in the forefront of the battles that passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and to extend and broaden that landmark legislation by signing the new measure only last month.

It represents my faith in the desire of blacks and other minority citizens to strengthen our political system for the good of all Americans.

The contributions of blacks cross all walks of American life, including the tragedy of war. In our historic battles around the world, the blood of the black soldier, sailor, airman or Marine has run just as freely as that of other Americans defending our beloved country.

It would be difficult to imagine American music, art, culture, science and medicine -- almost anything that is considered American -- without acknowledging the great contributions of blacks in our society.

Many of us remember these names, but it is still well to pay them formal tribute here as we speak of our Nation's history and the American Bicentennial: Phyllis Wheatley, one of America's first great black writers; Lemuel Haynes, a minister who served at Lexington; Peter Salem and Salem Poor, who were singled out for gallantry at the Battle of Bunker Hill; Booker T. Washington, the distinguished scholar; Frederick Douglass, the magnetic orator; Harriet Tubman, the underground railroad conductor; Daniel Hale Williams for his pioneering work in open heart surgery; A. Phillip Randolph, and his efforts for the worker; Walter White and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; Whitney Young, Jr., of the National Urban League; poet Paul Laurence Dunbar; the Reverend Leon Sullivan in job training; Chappie James in the United States Air Force; in music, contralto Marian Anderson, Duke Ellington, Louie Armstrong, and many, many others; in sports, Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Muhammed Ali, Jackie Robinson and Henry Aaron and, of course, the incredible Lou Brock and Bob Gibson; and I should add a personal friend of mine, Sammy Davis, Jr.

These men and women gave, and still give, pride and dignity to our people and honor to our Nation. Many of their names have virtually become institutions in our country. It is evident that the church has been a major influence in black accomplishments.

When we think of freedom, including freedom of religion, the National Baptist Convention stands as a monument and a testament to the strength of spiritual conviction and commitment. With more than six million members, the National Baptist Convention gives testimony to the individual integrity and dignity of the black American.

I would be negligent if I did not pay tribute in the very highest sense to the untiring, unselfish work of Dr. Jackson, your spiritual leader for more than two decades.

Many of the traditional black colleges were founded by the church. The first black Senator, Hiram Revels, was a minister. Prince Hall Masons, one of the oldest black fraternal groups, traces its origin back to 1787. As many of you know, Prince Hall Masons was a minister.

In our own times, Dr. Martin Luther King, Dr. Jackson and other clergymen led the civil rights movement inspired by the teachings of the Prince of Peace. The black church saw the need to concentrate early on education.

Let me add that the issue in 1837, when Cheyney State College was founded in Pennsylvania as the first black institution of higher learning, was quality education. The need today is still quality education. I assure you here today that I stand for quality education for every American -- not one single child in this country is excluded. With reason, with calm, with sincerity and some prayers, from all of us, we will master these trials and tribulations and become a greater Nation because of them.

The need for strong church leadership is just as great today as it was 200 years ago or a century ago. As a matter of fact, I firmly believe there should be more church leadership in this country. We see enough of material power.

What the American people need to do and feel more often is the spiritual power of the church, school and our family in our lives. As I look out at all of you at this great convention I see a giant family. All of us are brothers and sisters. This is a magnificent concept because the family is the world's basic social, economic and political unit. I believe we determine the course of our lives, for the most part, in the family home. It is the home which teaches basic principles -- the imperishable qualities of truth, integrity, unselfishness and, most importantly, love.

Society has undergone vast changes in the past generation and new ideas are constantly influencing our lives. New materialism, the pressures of modern life, new attitudes, social values, crime in our inner cities -- all of these greatly affect the everyday life of the family. All of us have the responsibility to stand and support the standards we believe in. As religious people, stand up for your faith. I stand with you. We believe in the same God.

Wherever I go people are kind and say to me: "We are praying for you. You are in our prayers." This has been a tremendous source of inner strength and peace for me. It inspires me to pray harder when I get on my own knees for God's guidance and it reminds me that I do not act alone but for and with you and all our fellow citizens.

For life to be constructive -- to build a greater, finer Nation -- we must appeal to higher motives than fear, higher beliefs than a passing fancy or fad, higher aspirations than the law. We must appeal to the highest motive and aspiration of all, the concept of our spiritual destiny. The world's and this Nation's greatest problems can be solved only by sincere changes of the will and human heart.

The future of America is not so much based on how much energy and steel we can produce -- although these are, of course, vital to our existence -- but the future of America is based on the rights and responsibilities that we as individual citizens are willing to commit to others and accept ourselves.

We speak of the common man and woman in America. This is a great and noble thought for it conveys the dignity of the individual citizen. I offer you here today a greater and nobler goal for which to strive -- the communion of Americans, the coming together to face a common destiny as one people, one Nation dedicated not only to the preservation but to the extension of that unity.

The American experience has been that competition in all walks of life -- of our national life -- strengthens our country. As a people, we believe in competition. Today, as never before, blacks are competing in our society and America is better for it. This is the American dream fulfilled.

Many of our problems of modern living cannot be dealt with through legislation, through Government money. They can only be solved from within the home, within the community and within the private enterprise system where competition is so important. That is where each of you comes in, for you represent the vast majority of blacks in this country who support your family, educate your children, pay your taxes, cast your votes and support your church.

Those of you here are teaching all of us in America a very great lesson. That is, the problems of human rights are not so much burdens to carry as they are avenues to achievement. The end of the journey is not so important as the fact that we are on the right road. Every citizen has a right to the means necessary for the development of his material and spiritual life. That same citizen -- every citizen -- has the responsibility to promote the good of society as a member of it. All Americans -- I repeat, all Americans -- must be free, and those who enjoy freedom must give freedom to others.

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No declaration of human rights has ever surpassed the Golden Rule. It is our job, yours and mine, to live the Golden Rule and thus fortify the declaration of human rights.

The world has many roads to accomplishment -- most of them are neither high nor low, they are middle roads. I believe the middle road, avoiding the extremes, is America's surest path to continue to achieve.

Let us, therefore, go forward together to build a new and better America. Let us not look back because we cannot change the old. Instead, let us look to the future and change the new for the better. It is in our hearts to forgive wrong. It is in our hands to reshape those wrongs into right. Let us together accept the spiritual, moral, social and economic challenges of America's third century.

Together we will fulfill the heritage of those who came before us. Together we will open up new horizons for millions of Americans not yet born. Together we will serve one another -- our country and our fellow men and women. Together we will fulfill our common national future.

God bless you and thank you very, very much.

END (AT 2:20 P.M. CDT)