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Office of the White House Press Secretary  
(Omaha, Nebraska)

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
TO BE DELIVERED AT THE COMMENCEMENT  
EXERCISES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEBRASKA

University of Nebraska Sports Center  
Lincoln, Nebraska

President Varner, distinguished guests, graduating members of the Class of 1976, and fellow Nebraskans:

It is a great privilege and a very high honor for me to join you here on this occasion.

I was born not far from here in Omaha and although I moved away at an early age, I have always held a great affection and respect for Nebraska and for the people of the Great Plains.

Some years before many of you were born, I can remember the welcome given by Great Britain to Dwight Eisenhower, who was raised, of course, in your next door neighbor, the state of Kansas. It was just after the Second World War, and he was a hero on both sides of the Atlantic.

There in the Guildhall, before an assemblage of leading dignitaries, Ike told the audience in simple but moving eloquence, "I come from the heart of America

It was always one of his proudest claims, it has always been one of my proudest claims, and in the years ahead I hope that it will become one of your proudest testaments as well.

Before coming here today, I thought back for a few moments on how much you, the graduating students of the Class of 1976, have seen and witnessed during the four years you have been in college.

Certainly these four years have been among the most traumatic and trying in the history of the United States. Since you came here as freshmen:

... One of our longest and most divisive wars has wound to a tragic conclusion.

... We have experienced the worst recession since the dust bowl days of the 1930's.

... We have suffered the worst inflation in our peacetime history.

... And scandal in high office has cast a shadow over the Presidency itself.

Nor did any of these events occur in a vacuum. They followed directly upon a decade that was filled with even greater social unrest and tension. Violence, campus riots, civil disturbances mounting distrust -- all of these were an unhappy legacy of the 1960's.

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By the time that you came to college, some of our most influential citizens seemed to be losing faith in America.

In The Greening of America, a book that swept many college campuses early in the 1970's, author Charles Reich asserted that "for most Americans, work is mindless, exhausting, boring, servile, and hateful... our life activities have become plastic, vicarious and false to our genuine needs."

"The Nation," concluded a well-known historian, "is essentially evil and the evil can be exorcised only by turning the system upside down." A leading newspaper columnist said it more pointedly: "American life doesn't work anymore."

Fortunately, the great majority of our people never gave up--in themselves or in their country. In the four years that you have been here at the University, the nation has not only persevered; it has prevailed.

As you leave today to enter the mainstream of the working world or perhaps to continue your studies, I would suggest to you that the United States is far different today from the world you knew when you came here as freshmen.

The changes are perhaps most evident in areas such as our economy. For millions upon millions of our citizens, the fears of inflation and unemployment--so strongly only a year ago--are now receding. No one believes that we have fully cured our economic ailments, but the patient is mending rapidly and there is every reason to be more confident about the future.

Progress can be found in many other areas, too. We are at peace. Our friendships in Europe and in the Pacific are showing renewed vitality. As you leave this University today, you become part of the first generation in more than thirty years that can graduate without fear of being drafted into the Armed Forces.

Then, too, our farm exports to the rest of the world are at record levels. We are forging new, more creative relationships with the developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere.

Because we are strong, because we are prepared, because our will is undiminished and our purpose is clear, America has gained new respect. The free world once more looks to us for leadership and inspiration.

All of these changes are surface examples of a broader phenomenon that is occurring in our society. I sense that the nation is finally turning away from an incessant preoccupation with its troubles, turning away from the inward-looking pessimism, to a new spirit of optimism. A new bouyancy is emerging in the country; for the first time in a long while, there is a growing faith in the future.

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We see it in the way that consumers are now committing more of their financial resources to new homes, new cars and other major purchases. We see it in the way that businesses are once again beginning to invest in the future. Not only are Americans investing in America's future, but foreigners are, too, as they decide to build new businesses, shopping centers, and other large enterprises here. We also see this growing confidence out across the great bread basket of the country where farmers are expanding their crops. We see it on campuses where students have put down their bricks and taken up their books. And we see it especially in churches and in families where there is a deep yearning for spiritual fulfillment.

We have not yet overcome many of our most persistent problems, and no one should pretend we have. We are still far below our potential as a people. Unemployment, poverty, crime, and prejudice are still far too widespread. But we have moved beyond a time that could be characterized as the greening of America; what we see today is the healing of America.

I would urge upon you that as young men and women entering a world of swift, blinding change, you try to learn and understand what has happened in these last few years. One day when you are directing the affairs of State and Nation, it may be helpful to look back upon the 1970's and ask how America pulled itself up by its bootstraps.

One answer, I suggest, is that even in its darkest hours, the United States has retained enormous economic, material and moral strengths. Even when the nation was afflicted with high inflation and high unemployment, we still had the most dynamic, most productive economic system in the world. With less than six percent of the world's population, we continued to produce over a third of the world's goods and services. Our standard of living remains unmatched. Our farmers continue to be the wonder of mankind. A single American farmer today produces enough food to feed 50 people, both here and abroad. And let us never forget the great reservoir of spiritual and moral strength that we have in this country, the American character that has never known the meaning of the word "Retreat".

After the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson was asked why American soldiers had been so successful in the battlefields of Europe. "I tell you," he said, "that the war was won by the American spirit... You know what one of our American wits said, that it only took half as long to train an American Army as any other because you only had to train them to go one way."

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There is a second lesson to be learned from these last few years as well. It has struck me with special force since I have become your President. The fact is that every President of the United States in modern times is besieged with requests and pleas to intervene and solve almost every problem confronting our citizenry. As soon as serious difficulties arise, a cry seems to go up that the Federal Government should rush to the rescue with more programs, more spending, more regulations -- anything so long as the pain is eased and the problems are postponed to another day.

Well, I have been raised in a different school -- a school that has its home out here in the Great Plains. It's a school that says the American people are better equipped to solve many of their own problems than is the government in Washington. It's a school that says government has already grown to an ominous size in the United States and already interferes too much in the lives of its citizens. And it's a school that says when people gain the belief that the government has every answer, they lose belief in themselves.

There in Washington, as inflation and unemployment mounted in late 1974 and early 1975, there were rising pressures for the President and the Congress to intervene with massive new programs. Start spending more money, we were urged. Let's have higher and higher budgets, higher and higher deficits, more and more debt, and then if that only produces more inflation, we can put the economy in a new straight jacket of wage and price controls.

But we weren't prepared to go down that road again. We had seen its results too many times before. This time, with the stalwart help of your Congressional delegation from Nebraska, we resisted the temptation to let the government solve our economic problems but instead entrusted primary responsibility to the people themselves and to the great free enterprise system that is the mainspring of our economy.

Today, the results are self evident: The American economy is recovering more rapidly and with greater vitality than any other economy in the world. While the economic threats have certainly not disappeared, we now have concrete evidence that if Washington will only make the right decisions -- if Washington will only trust in the people -- then America can return to the path toward prosperity.

There is one final lesson to be drawn from these years that I hope you will always remember. Many times in the 1960's and the early 1970's, as the skies grew dark and cloudy, there was a temptation to give up, to yield to the voices of defeat or the voices of hysteria. But the American people never did. They never gave up.

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Here in Nebraska, people have always known full well what it is to endure and to overcome adversity. As students here at the University, you must have read about the hardships of 19th century prairie life in the novels of one of Nebraska's greatest natives and one of America's most beloved writers, Willa Cather. You must have talked with your parents and grandparents about the great farm depression and the droughts of the 1930s. You know that life on the Great Plains can be tough, and that the one thing you can never afford to do is quit. By instinct, Americans move in only one direction -- forward.

Back East, the story is sometimes told of how Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb. Time and time again, he tried to find the right filament but he could not unlock the secrets of science. Finally, his young assistant said, "Mr. Edison, perhaps you should give up. You have tried your experiments 586 times, and every time you have failed."

"No," replied Edison, "We have only found 586 ways that won't work and won't have to be tried again. Soon we will find one that does." And he did.

Edison was never a quitter. To him, as he once said, "Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."

Members of the Graduating Class of 1976:

I join your parents and friends this morning in saluting you for your accomplishments. By your studies here, you have earned one of the most cherished documents that anyone can possess: A college degree. You have successfully begun your careers during one of the most exciting and potentially one of the most rewarding periods in all of history.

In the years ahead, when new challenges arise -- as they surely will -- I urge that you bear in mind the lessons of the past.

-- Remember that America is a great and good nation with an enormous reservoir of material and personal resources.

-- Remember that the secret of America lies not in the power of its government but in the power, the freedom, and the goodness of its people.

-- And remember, too, that America is always at the height of her glory when she has to climb the tallest mountains.

A few years ago, when we celebrated the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, the biographer and poet, Carl Sandburg, went to the fields of Gettysburg to reflect for a few moments about the nation he loved.

He spoke about the history of America and the spirit of America.

The will and vision that motivated people in Plymouth seeking freedom of conscience, this moved on alive and was written on faces at Valley Forge. It was on the faces of men who marched from home to the campaign that brought them to Gettysburg.

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"Long before this time of ours," he said, "America saw the faces of men and women torn and shaken in turmoil, chaos and storm. Always the path of American destiny has been into the unknown. And always there arose enough of reserves of strength, balances of sanity, portions of wisdom to carry the nation through to a fresh start with an ever renewing vitality."

Today you begin your own journey into the unknown. You carry with you our best wishes and fondest hopes. You carry the wisdom of one of our finest Universities. And you carry, too, a great heritage -- of Nebraska, of the Plains, and of America.

Congratulations and God speed.

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