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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
NATIONAL BICENTENNIAL CONFERENCEINTERNATIONAL BALLROOM
WASHINGTON HILTON

9:35 A.M. EDT

Thank you very much, John, distinguished Members of the Congress, members of the Continental Army, it is a great privilege and pleasure to join you this morning and to launch this extremely 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 contributed most significantly thousands and thousands of hours of work preparing for events during the next 21 months. Your dedication will make this Bicentennial into a profound renewal for our great country, the United States of America. Your sense of having participated will be your best reward.

This group comes from many occupations in many different parts of our Nation, and I was privileged, yesterday, to meet so many of you personally. You reflect what I find most exciting about the Bicentennial activities -- they flow from the spirit of all of our people -- they are truly national in scope and truly non-partisan. The Bicentennial involves all sections of our country and yet represents a unity of purpose. As all of you know, perhaps better than I, over 6,000 projects are now planned with more being added everyday and every month. They represent 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 trees 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 three towns.

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I think these projects show there is not just one way, but many, many ways to observe the Nation's 200th birthday, and I vividly recall, as a young lad, being taught that the beauty of Joseph's coat is its many, many colors.

Just as the strength of the Nation comes from the richness of its many 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 so, to look to the future. John Adams envisioned the celebration of the Declaration of Independence in a letter to his wife, Abigail, in July of 1776. John Adams wrote the following:

"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 Almighty God. 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."

John Adams, who would later be the first Vice President and the second President of the United States, did not know, at that time, 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 the distant seas.

But, like other revolutionary leaders, he had faith in the future of the unformed Nation. Those were exciting, those were frustrating and those were 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 almost insurmountable job of agreeing long enough to fight a war with limited funds and limited 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 be expected to be translated from despotism to liberty in a featherbed."

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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 our fellow 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 will we leave to the next generation? What will America be in another 200 years?

I concede 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 has 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 James 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 -- this country continued to grow. Those Americans did not fail us.

When the debate over slavery and union erupted into 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.

In two World Wars, Americans gave their time, talent, resources, yes, 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 face new challenges -- our economic and energy problems. New perceptions, yes, and new priorities are required to meet new difficulties.

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We are engaged in a great national debate on 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 the wilderness, produce the greatest industrial machine ever developed and to also produce the highest standard of living of any Nation in the world.

In another 200 years, in 2175, Americans will prepare to celebrate the Nation's 400th birthday. We must act now so that they can say of us: "Americans in the 1970s did not fail us."

We can remember the past with flags and parades and fireworks as President Adams envisioned in the first summer of our 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.

Thank you very much.

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(AT 9:47 A.M. EDT)