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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
84TH CONTINENTAL CONGRESS
OF THE
DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
CONSTITUTION HALL

11:30 A.M. EDT

Madam General, Members of the DAR:

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to express my personal sense of loss at the sudden death of your late President-General, Mrs. Henry Stewart Jones.

Mrs. Jones, as all of you know, was a dedicated, serious patriot; a very great person. She will be greatly missed.

I hope that what I have to say today reflects some of the ideals she held and some of the concern she felt for our great Nation.

On a personal note, my mother was a proud and dedicated member of the DAR. I was proud to grow up in that tradition, and I was very proud to have this DAR background. Obviously, it is an honor for me to address this great gathering.

As descendants of the brave Americans who founded our Nation, each and every one of you have a proud heritage. But, I think you would be the first to agree that this heritage belongs not only to the DAR, but to all Americans inspired by our Nation's history.

We all share a great common heritage. Although you are the Daughters of the American Revolution, all of us are, in a sense, the children, the heirs of the American Revolution.

This year, especially, as we prepare for the celebration of our Bicentennial, it would be good for all Americans to do some soul-searching about where we are going as a Nation and what we are doing with the precious heritage of freedom that we inherited. This is a good time both to look backward and to look forward -- a good time to take stock.

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In so doing, we should not fall into the trap of blind nostalgia -- or persuading ourselves that America's best years are behind us.

There is a lot of negative talk like that going around in Washington, and elsewhere. I think it can best be answered in one word: Nonsense.

The truth is that if we were to somehow travel back in time together to the American Revolution, we might be more shocked by the similarities than by the differences. If anything, times were tougher then.

We were a divided people. Many historians estimate the colonists were split into three factions: those who favored independence, those who supported the royal cause, and those who straddled the fence waiting to see which side would win.

Inflation was more than a serious problem during the American Revolution. It was a near-fatal disease. Printing press money, the so-called Continental dollar, was only worth a fraction of its paper value. Many farmers and merchants refused to accept it even from hungry American soldiers trying to buy provisions.

Too often, American armies were defeated, defeated in battle and driven to humiliating retreats. Disease, lack of equipment and lack of training were chronic. We were dependent on foreign assistance for many of our weapons, uniforms and equipment -- and even for foreign advisers to train our troops.

If the French Government had not spent millions to help equip American forces and if we had not been assisted by a French army and a fleet at Yorktown, the American Revolution might have dragged on inconclusively for many, many years.

Yet, out of all of the suffering and uncertainty, a new Nation was born and grew up into one of the biggest and most powerful nations in the history of the world.

Character had a lot to do with it. The courage and vision of men like Washington, shared by thousands of soldiers and the valiant, patriotic women who sustained their fightingmen, as they have in all struggles, with their work and with their prayers.

Values were also very, very important. The moral imperatives and political ideals that were expressed with such eloquence by Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, and with such clarity by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison -- and Divine Providence also had something to do with it.

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Nor were our forefathers ashamed to acknowledge their debt to this source of strength in their dire time of trouble. Call it Divine Providence or call it destiny, 13 small colonies clustered along the Atlantic coast somehow managed to produce one of the most brilliant generations of leaders known to history -- the soldiers and the statesmen we know as the founders of this great country.

But even more remarkable than the genius of the founders, themselves, is the fact that generation after generation of Americans have continued to build on the foundation that they left us. Fortunately for us and for the world, we have never lost sight of their great dream.

Other countries, of course, have had brilliant leaders. But no other country can point to two centuries dedicated to expanding and perfecting a continuing revolution in a free society.

This is what makes America unique in the history of nations. And that is why, although our experience in Indochina has been one of heroic sacrifices and great disappointments, I am convinced that we can and will emerge from this ordeal stronger and wiser as a Nation, just as we have from others even greater in the past.

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This brings me to the soul-searching -- the inventory of opportunities -- of challenges before us today. How do we stand today? Are we still on the right course?

It would be impossible for me in the time here to go over every single issue -- political, military, diplomatic, and economic -- that this question raises, so let me focus, if I might, on just one of them -- our national defense.

I ask this question: Are we strong enough today? And, just as important, will we be strong enough tomorrow?

According to a recent poll, some Americans have questions about our world position and the cost of maintaining that position. The poll indicated that Americans want the United States, and I quote, "to play an active role in the world."

Yet, at the same time, they believe the defense budget should be reduced. Some want it emasculated. Americans still believe that being strong militarily is important. They want, in the words of the poll's report, "a powerful and militarily secure standing for the United States in the world." What they don't like is the price tag that comes with it.

This is a basic dilemma. When a nation wants to achieve contradictory goals, such as a military security and less defense spending, sooner or later citizens must make a choice.

It is becoming fashionable in some quarters to charge that military force is outmoded in the modern world. It is argued, for example, that modern weaponry, especially nuclear armaments, are too destructive to use and that, therefore, they won't ever be used.

Further, it is argued, when we have applied military power, it has not produced the results we wanted, such as in Southeast Asia.

Finally, it is said that we are unlikely to be attacked in any event. Detente, according to this kind of reasoning, guarantees that future conflicts will be nonviolent ones, which may be settled by negotiation.

It is my judgment that these arguments ignore a basic fact of international politics, one that has been proven repeatedly throughout history: national interest can be guarded only by national strength. In a conflict-ridden world, national strength in the broadest sense must be supported by military strengths.

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It is often overlooked that detente -- the process of reducing tensions with the USSR -- has been possible only because of U.S. strength and U.S. resolve.

It was after a prolonged period of Cold War testing and confrontation, during which the United States and the rest of the Western world stood fast, that it became possible to move forward with the USSR in negotiations aimed at reducing the chances for grave miscalculations and reducing the risk of nuclear war.

In these negotiations, we have safeguarded our vital defense interests. To weaken our defenses is to weaken one of the foundations of detente.

A posture of deliberate weakness is most dangerous when the worldwide military balance threatens to deteriorate, but at any time weakness would be folly for the United States, a great Nation with interests spanning the globe.

If we were to cut ourselves back to such a weak posture, as some recommend, we would soon find ourselves paying an unacceptable price. We cannot shrink our economy back to pre-1939 dimensions. We cannot turn our back on the rest of the world, as we foolishly sought to do in the 1930.

Like it or not, we are a great power and our real choice is whether to succeed or fail in a role we cannot shirk. There is no other nation in the whole free world capable of stepping into our role.

If we conclude, as I believe we must, that we still need a strong national defense, the next issue is quite obvious: How much and what kind?

The answer depends on continuing vigilant assessment of the defenses needed to safeguard this great Nation, an assessment measured in terms of the intentions and capabilities of potential adversaries and the common strength forged by our alliances.

Our nuclear deterrent must be gauged against the nuclear capabilities and intentions of others, and in particular the Soviet Union.

It is for this reason that the SALT negotiations and the Vladivostok agreements I signed with General Secretary Brezhnev are of such importance. We are working responsibly to put a cap on the nuclear arms race. Similarly, the amount and the type of conventional forces required will depend on our continuing ability to maintain a truly effective national defense.

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It will also depend on our ability to meet our security commitments and on our ability with our allies to work with the Warsaw Pact nations toward reduction in forces, which will increase the prospect for international stability.

It is of fundamental importance to both the United States and to the world that the strategic balance be maintained, and strategic nuclear forces are the foundation of our defense.

We will work toward further strategic arms limitations. We will maintain a strategic arms balance.

Neither we, nor our allies, can afford the consequences if this fundamental balance shifts against us. I promise you that no defense budget I submit to the Congress will ever sell us short or shift the balance against the United States of America.

I respectfully call upon each and every Member of the Congress, House and Senate to make the same pledge, for our survival as a Nation could well depend upon it.

I call upon you to let your Senators and Congressmen know how you feel individually and collectively. Let us never forget this: that our Pledge of Allegiance is to one nation indivisible, not one nation indefensible.

In the area of conventional forces, we also confront some difficult challenges. Our troops in Europe, for example, are a key element in shielding Europe from military attacks or pressures of one kind or another. Present force levels are necessary to maintain a satisfactory conventional military balance between the Alliance on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact nations on the other.

Unilateral reductions by the United States would upset that balance and constitute a major political change. The United States has agreed with our allies that there will be no unilateral troop reductions, except through mutual negotiations.

Our troop levels in that part of the world are not an obstacle to improved East-West relations in Europe. On the contrary, a stable military balance has been the starting point for hopeful new diplomacy.

For their part, the Europeans contribute the largest part of the conventional defense of the Alliance. Unilateral U.S. reductions would undercut their efforts and would undermine confidence in the United States for the support of the Alliance.

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There are two other crucial areas of conventional forces necessary to maintain our side of the strategic balance, one our long-range air capability and sea power. If we are to sustain our ability to react appropriately to threats to our interests from far away shores, we may need to increase our already considerable abilities to airlift troops and supplies long distances.

The United States and its allies depend heavily on the freedom of the seas for trade and for commerce. Thus, it is vital for us to maintain a full range of capabilities on the many oceans of the world.

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Last summer, the Atlantic Alliance celebrated its 25th year -- a quarter of a century anniversary -- 25 years of peace through strength on the European continent. To mark the occasion and to reaffirm our collective resolve, we joined with other member nations in a Declaration of Atlantic Relations. I will be meeting personally with allied leaders in the very near future to seek further progress toward our common goal -- a peaceful and a secure free world.

But neither NATO nor the United States can guarantee a peaceful and secure free world if we allow our defenses to erode.

Now, what about the price tag? What is it costing us to maintain our military strength? Critics of a strong defense say that the defense budget is higher than ever. But the truth is -- and this we must understand and we must tell others -- in terms of what each dollar will buy, the defense budget is now lower than any time since 1964, prior to our Vietnam build-up.

The reason for this is that inflation has taken just as high a toll of the defense dollar's purchasing power as it has from every family, from every business, from every community. Take away the effects of inflation and real pay increases, which are necessary to recruit our new all-volunteer forces, and what is left of the defense budget has actually declined in purchasing power during the last four years.

For example, in 1968, defense spending represented about 60 percent of our total Federal Government spending. Today, it is down to about 27 percent.

We cannot afford, as I see it, to let our defense strength slide down while other nations build up their forces. It is the obligation, as I see it, of each of us to keep America strong -- the obligation of the Congress, of this Administration, and of each American concerned about the future of his or her great country.

And I pledge to you as solemnly and as strongly as I can that I will do my part and I am sure each and every one of you will do your part.

A great hero who led our people, both in war and in peace, Dwight Eisenhower, once said that "a true posture of defense is composed of three factors--spiritual, military and economic."

We have the economic and industrial strength it takes to keep America a first-rate power.

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Spiritual strength is less tangible. It is hard to measure in any exact way. But I can tell you this: I have traveled to just about every corner of America since becoming President and every where I found the same confidence, the same good spirit and the same willingness to pull together to make this an even greater and better country.

That is the American spirit that we can be proud of today, as we have in the past.

Yes, we have our problems, our doubts and some have many questions. Yet, we also have the strength to ask tough questions and to seek honest answers, painful though they may be. And the American people still have the character and the vision that was tempered in the forge of the Revolution 200 years ago.

Finally, there is our actual military establishment. I have already talked this morning about some of the hardware and some of the costs. I will just add that I don't think we have ever had a finer, better motivated men and women serving under the American flag than we have today -- and I have met a lot of these fine young people and you and I should be very proud of them.

They are of the stock which George Washington would have been proud to command. The commanders of today are proud of them.

George Washington made the point that I have tried to put across today. "To be prepared for war," George Washington declared, "is one of the most effective means of preserving the peace."

Peace is what we are really talking about, the building of peace and the preserving of peace. And only a strong America can build a strong and durable peace.

And as I conclude, let me say this; As children of the American Revolution, we owe this both to the patriots who came before us, and to the generations who one day will inherit from us all that we have achieved together in two centuries of struggle.

Thank you very much.

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(AT 11:57 A.M. EDT)