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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
73RD ANNUAL NAVY LEAGUE CONVENTION

IMPERIAL BALLROOM
FAIRMONT HOTEL

1:55 P.M. CDT

Thank you very much, Mr. President, Governor Edwards, Senator Johnston, Representative Hebert, Representative Treen, and my dear friend Representative Lindy Boggs, Mayor Landrieu, Rabbi Feibelman, Archbishop Hannan, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Chaplain Ray, merci garcon.

Obviously, Governor, I am delighted and highly honored to be a good Cajun.

Mr. Governor, you are also a good Cajun and have done very well in the political arena in Louisiana. Now that I am a good Cajun, I hope I am as lucky as you are. (Laughter)

Well, members of the Navy League and your honored guests, it is a great privilege and a very high honor to have the opportunity of being here in New Orleans and participating in your 73rd annual convention.

They say the Navy offers opportunity and you had better believe it.

In 1942, I became an Ensign, one of those 90-day wonders. In 1943, I became a Lieutenant. In 1945, I became a Lt. Commander. And in 1974, I became Commander-in-Chief. (Laughter)

Now, you can't ask for any more opportunity than that. (Laughter)

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I do have to admit that being Commander-in-Chief of all of our Armed Forces does present me with one of several problems; in November, at the Army-Navy game, for example. I now have to spend half of the game rooting for the Army and half of the game rooting for the Navy.

Fortunately, the late President Kennedy came up with the perfect solution to a somewhat similar problem. He was in Iowa just before their big game with Notre Dame, and someone asked him who he would be rooting for. John Kennedy said, "I will be rooting for Iowa." A tremendous cheer went up. Then he added, "But, I will be praying for Notre Dame." (Laughter)

So, come the Army-Navy game, I will let you figure out who I will be rooting for, and who I will be praying for.

But, there is a much more serious subject than the Army-Navy game that I would like to discuss with you for a moment -- the strength and the size of our Merchant Marine and our Navy.

Both are as vital as anyone can imagine to our survival as a Nation, and yet, both of them face very serious problems. The problems are not insolvable.

In the case of the Merchant Marine, I have always believed in doing everything possible to keep the American flag flying over a large, modern, competitive Merchant Marine.

In Congress, I worked long and hard with many, many others to help pass the Merchant Marine Act of 1970. This very important legislation initiated a Federal program to improve the international competitive position of the United States Merchant Marine.

Through this program, contracts will have been awarded by June 13 of this year for new construction or conversion of approximately 77 ships, with an annual funding of some \$284 million.

Budget requests for construction subsidies will continue at approximately the same level in the next fiscal year. Expenditures for operational subsidies for United States flag ships will climb, and I think appropriately, to a record high of \$316 million.

Our total Federal expenditures for Federal Maritime programs -- and bear in mind they are an integral part of our total seagoing Navy -- will be some \$678 million as compared with a relatively smaller sum of about \$500 million two years ago.

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I give you my word that we will have a vital Merchant Marine in the future, and in the White House I will do as I did in the Congress, work for that objective for our national security.

While I am on the subject of our Merchant Marine, let me add my very strong personal congratulations to Paul Hall, President of the Seafarers' International for this wonderful award he has received.

There is a man who believes in America, has fought for America, and will continue to be in the leadership in keeping America strong in the future.

Congratulations, Paul.

It is a well-deserved tribute to a great union leader and a great person.

Our Navy also has entered into a time of challenge. Like the rest of our Armed Forces, its cost, even its purpose, is being questioned by many serious, sincere Americans in and out of the Congress.

No doubt, some stems from very understandable desires to spend money on plowshares rather than on swords; to put our resources into so-called social programs instead of into defense.

But to keep America at peace, to enable us to make the kind of social progress we really want, we must keep America strong today and strong tomorrow.

One of those invaluable keys to achieving peace is a strong, modern American fleet. The Navy is still a very major instrument for resolving crises short of war. Its very presence in a trouble spot serves as a deterrent.

It carries supplies, shows the flag and provides a very flexible, but yet very powerful, force that can help defuse, defuse tension in an area before it deteriorates into a crisis. It is a very vital part of our total defense establishment in peace, as well as in war.

Let me put it in, if I might, even more concrete terms. Since 1958 our Navy and Marines have served in quick response to emergency situations 49 different times. The nature of the response, of course, varied from 32 cases in which it was a matter of showing the flag, to emergency interventions to protect American lives, property and our national interest.

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Let me give you several examples. In 1958, Navy and Marine units helped to restore order in riot-torn Lebanon and to protect American interests. In 1962, they enforced the quarantine on Soviet ships and helped to end the Cuban missile crisis.

In 1965, they saved American lives and helped restore order in the Dominican Republic. In 1970, they helped to prevent disturbances in Jordan from erupting into another Middle Eastern crisis.

And right now, in Southeast Asia, Navy and Marine forces are standing by to assist in humanitarian relief and evacuation efforts, or to carry out any mission assigned to them.

Already, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Navy and Marines, particularly under their fine leadership of our Secretary of the Navy, Bill Mittendorf, for their heroic efforts in evacuating Americans and a number of Cambodians from the besieged city of Phnom Penh without casualties and without a hitch.

It was a professionally planned and executed maneuver typical of what we have come to expect from our Naval forces.

Historically speaking, it is very appropriate on this occasion to talk about seapower, for if America ever learned the importance of seapower, it was on April 23, 1814 -- 161 years ago today.

The War of 1812 was at its height and the British, backed up by their enormous Navy, decided on that date in 1814 to extend a blockade along the entire American coast.

The small, weak, ill-equipped American Navy could do little to stop it. The British roamed the East Coast almost at will.

By August of 1814, we had even suffered the humiliation of an enemy attack on Washington, D.C. and the burning of the White House.

We had been helpless to defend our own capital city. In the century and a half since 1814, we have been taught even more about the importance of seapower.

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Perhaps Teddy Roosevelt summed it up best when he said, "A good Navy is not provocative of war. It is the guarantee of peace." Today, even more than in the past, America is dependent on seapower. This includes a strong Merchant Marine as well as the Navy.

For one thing, we need free sea lanes and the fast merchant ships to maintain the crucial flow of raw materials and energy to the United States.

For instance, in 1974 alone, we imported more than two billion barrels of crude oil and refined products, accounting for about 36 percent of our total domestic consumption. Of this total, more than 90 percent was carried into this country in foreign bottoms.

It is my policy to reverse this dependence on foreign oil by making America energy independent. But for now, the facts are quite plain: American prosperity, perhaps even American survival, still depends on keeping the sea lanes open and only a strong American Navy can guarantee that result.

So, the obvious questions, quite frankly, are: What is the state of American seapower today? What will it be in the future?

Since 1968, the size of the Navy has been cut literally in half. Today, our fleet of 500 ships is the smallest since 1939, two years before Pearl Harbor. And it, unfortunately, is still shrinking. In fact, the Navy's active fleet will be down to 490 ships by June 30, 1976, five days before we celebrate our 200th birthday as a free and independent Nation.

Fortunately, however, there is also a positive side to all of this. Today's U.S. Navy has some tremendous assets. Our aircraft carriers and their air groups are very potent weapons systems. These magnificent forces contribute immeasurably to making our overall strike forces the very best in the world.

Our nuclear powered submarines and nuclear powered surface ships are the finest in the world. We have more of them than any other power. The United States Marine Corps is unrivaled as a combat force. And the spirit and the morale of the Marines are as high as they have ever been.

In fact, the entire Navy-Marine Corps team has these very important, very vital ingredients: Combat-proven strength, dynamic leadership and dedicated professionalism and we thank them all for these important assets that they contribute to our national security.

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I have full confidence in the new professionals of our Navy and Marine Corps. But the Navy and the Marine Corps today are the results of careful planning of the days in the past. If both are to maintain the same high standards for the days ahead, we must take into account some dramatic changes in the global balance of power.

At the outset of World War II, America had a 3,000 mile ocean barrier on the East Coast and a 10,000 mile ocean barrier on the West Coast. The mighty British Fleet acted as a friendly buffer. And the United States had a two-year lead time to gear up our great military production capabilities between the outbreak of war in Europe and our own entry at Pearl Harbor.

Today we face a very different situation. For example, Soviet naval units now freely roam the world seas, circumnavigating the State of Hawaii in the Pacific, and operating in the Gulf of Mexico.

Let me give you a very graphic example, if I might, something that has happened within the past few days. Elements from all four fleets of the Soviet Navy have just completed global maneuvers. More than 200 Soviet ships deployed in all of the oceans of the world participated in this exercise. More than 50 Soviet ships were deployed in the Atlantic, extending their maneuvers to the Norwegian Sea and southwest of the British Isles.

Soviet reconnaissance aircraft, operating from Cuba and Guinea, conducted ocean surveillance over wide areas of the Atlantic. The Soviet Navy was also active in the Mediterranean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

There is no doubt about it, the Soviet Union understands the importance of seapower. The Russians built up their Navy while we permitted ours to shrink and they know how to show their flag.

Unfortunately the double blows of inflation and recession, along with other drains on government revenues, are occurring at precisely the time that we should be putting more funds into more ships. As a consequence, Department of Defense expenditures in the next fiscal year will represent slightly less than six percent of the Gross National Product, the lowest point since the pre-Korean demobilization.

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In real terms, after making all of the adjustments for inflation, Defense Department spending has been cut almost 40 percent since the height of the Vietnam war. It is 15 percent below the present Vietnam level.

As a percentage of total Government spending, including State and local, defense expenditures come to only 16 percent, the lowest point since before Pearl Harbor.

As for our human resources, today only 1 percent of America's population is under arms. Our military manpower is actually nearly 600,000 below the pre-Vietnam level. However good their intentions, those who claim that America is overarmed and overspending on defense are wrong.

It is my very deep conviction we cannot afford to cut any further without endangering our national security. While our own military spending has been declining, others have not been idle. The Soviet Union, for example, is outspending us on defense by at least 20 percent.

As far as the Navy is concerned, the budget that I have submitted to the Congress for the next fiscal year requests \$3 billion 100 million to build 23 new ships, and an additional \$2 billion 300 million to restore full funding to our shipbuilding account of previous years.

I deeply believe that the vast majority of our citizens today want to maintain American sea, land and air forces that are second to none.

Let it never be said that our generation allowed American seapower to erode into a second class status. Let it never be said that we permitted our Merchant fleet to disappear by attrition.

Only a strong America, an America strong of will, strong of purpose, can be an effective force for peace in a troubled, modern world, and a strong Navy and Merchant Marine are essential to a strong America.

I pledge to you that I will continue to work with all of you, and literally thousands like you, for the kind of America that has been good, not only for us, but for all mankind. And I will ask for your help in pursuing this vital goal as we move ahead in the days and the months before us.

Thank you very, very much.

END (AT 2:15 P.M. CDT)