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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
COMMISSIONING OF THE
USS NIMITZ

NAVAL AIR STATION

11:44 A.M. EDT

Distinguished Members of the Congress,
Secretary Middendorf, Admiral Holloway, Admiral Cousins,
Captain Compton, Mrs. Lay, distinguished guests, ladies
and gentlemen:

At the outset, let me thank the Secretary of
Defense for his more than generous comments, and let
me simply reiterate the theme that he set forth. We
will continue to be strong. We will keep our commit-
ments, and we will remain a great country.

As each of us looks upon this great ship, a
single thought must seize our mind. Only the United
States of America can make a machine like this. There
is nothing like it in the world today.

We have witnessed the magic moment when an
intricate mass of steel and cable and sophisticated
marvels of engineering suddenly become a living thing
with a unique personality.

No matter how many commissionings you take
part in, breaking the pennant and setting the first
watch involves a special reward for all of us who love
the sea and the United States Navy.

I thank you very much, Captain Compton,
and all of the ship's company for the privilege of
being here.

The NIMITZ is now a United States Ship. I
congratulate all who helped build her, and all who
man her, as well as their loved ones who, as many of you
know better than I, will do a lot of waiting for the
sake of our country and of freedom everywhere.

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Their allegiance and their service to the country is also in the very best tradition of this great Nation. We all regret that Mrs. Chester W. Nimitz, Sr., cannot share this proud honor with all of us, but I am happy that Mrs. Lay and other members of the Admiral's family are here.

It is also gratifying to have Admiral Rickover here for without these two farsighted submarineers, Fleet Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Rickover, we would have no nuclear Navy.

Few of us remember that it was Admiral Nimitz, as he was completing his career as Chief of Naval Operations in 1947, who recommended to the then Secretary of the Navy that the Bureau of Ships and the new Atomic Energy Commission get together to design and to build a nuclear propulsion plant for a submarine. Admiral Rickover took it from there.

I see this great ship as a double symbol of today's challenging times. She is the first of all a symbol of the United States, of our immense resources, in materials and skilled manpower, of our inexhaustible energy, of the inventive and productive genius of our free competitive economic system and of our massive, but controlled, military strength.

Wherever the United States Ship NIMITZ shows her flag, she will be seen as we see her now -- a solid symbol of United States strength, United States resolve made in America and manned by Americans.

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She is a movable part and parcel of our country, a self-contained city at sea plying the international waters of the world in defense of our national interest. Whether her mission is one of defense, diplomacy or humanity, the NIMITZ will command awe and admiration from some, caution and circumspection from others, and respect from all.

There is no need for me to dwell on the importance of aircraft carriers in today and tomorrow's defense planning, though as an old carrier man myself, I might like that role.

During recent days, I think it is worthy to note we have seen the most convincing demonstration of their readiness and their flexibility in the successful execution of national policy.

Without the fine aircraft carriers which served as the nucleus of our forces operating off South Vietnam, without the skill and the heroic performance of Marine Corps and Naval aviation and support personnel, without the Air Force helicopter crews who operated from the carrier decks, we could not have rescued all of the remaining American citizens and thousands of endangered Vietnamese from Saigon within 20 hours. And I congratulate, on behalf of all of you, the work that was done on that occasion.

The NIMITZ joins the fleet at an auspicious moment, when our determination to strengthen our ties with allies across both great oceans, and to work for peace and stability around the world requires clear demonstration.

Along with our other forces worldwide, the NIMITZ will make critically important contributions in our continuing quest for a peaceful planet, a planet whose surface is more than 70 percent ocean.

As I see the United States ship NIMITZ as a symbol of the vast power, the protective, or productive, skill and economic strength of America, so will others around the world.

To all, this great ship is visible evidence of our commitment to friends and allies and our capability to maintain those commitments. But for Americans, especially, she is also a symbol of the man whose name she bears.

The grandson of a seafaring German immigrant who grew up in the great State of Texas and never lost his pride in his native State, Chester W. Nimitz started from the smoke of Pearl Harbor and carried the fight to the enemy.

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His superb leadership and the valor of more than 2 million American fighting men culminated on the deck of the USS MISSOURI four years later as he signed the Japanese surrender as commander-in-chief of the largest Naval armada ever assembled.

Looking back on a period of my own life, one of the things of which I am the proudest is that I can say, "I served under Admiral Nimitz in the Pacific."

As a lowly Lieutenant on the USS MONTEREY, a carrier you could probably stow on the hangar deck of the NIMITZ, I saw very little of Fleet Admirals during World War II, but every Watch Officer can recognize the CINCPAC dispatches that Admiral Nimitz obviously had written in his own hand.

One biographer who did not know him, or who, I should say did know him, Professor B. Potter of the Naval Academy, summed up Admiral Nimitz' qualities in simple words, that will serve as a model for anyone who aspires to leadership in any line of endeavor, and I quote from Professor Potter: "He founded himself with the ablest men he could find and sought their advice, but he made his own decisions. He was a keen strategist who never forgot that he was dealing with human beings on both sides of the conflict. He was aggressive in war with hate, audacious while never failing to weigh the risks."

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Admiral Nimitz, of all the great American Commanders of World War II, was one of the most self-efacing and certainly one of the most effective. He possessed great stamina, an abundance of common sense and such immense inner strength that he felt no need to strut or to shout.

Born near what today we would call the poverty level, he worked hard, studied hard and was a long, long time getting ahead. He spent his whole life training to serve his country in commanding men at sea -- and when he was needed, he was prepared.

He learned by his mistakes and was tolerant of others, but he was always in command. Those who had the good fortune to know Admiral Nimitz will say his fundamental honesty -- intellectual honesty and integrity -- enabled him to keep a steady course toward his ultimate objective without yielding to the tremendous pressures of his vast responsibilities.

He did the job he was prepared to do, did it superbly, hung up his sword and filled his final years with quiet service to his country and to the cause of peace.

Repeatedly urged to write his wartime memoirs, Admiral Nimitz just as repeatedly refused. To do so, he explained, would compel him either to hurt the reputations of some fine shipmates or tell some whopping lies.

His own philosophy, in his own words, has long been a personal inspiration to me. Typically, he credited it to his seafaring grandfather. "The sea, like life itself is a stern taskmaster," he recalled. "The best way to get along with either is to learn all you can, then do your best, and don't worry, especially about things over which you have no control."

So, this great ship is a symbol of a great sea commander and a great American -- one whose common virtues, magnified by the stern demands of duty -- turned defeat into victory and made the broad Pacific again worthy of its name.

It is my determination to keep it that way, the way all oceans and all continents ought to be. But Fleet Admiral Nimitz and this fine ship both tell us that controlled strength is the sure guarantor of peace.

Let us all -- and particularly those who serve in the United States Ship NIMITZ now and hereafter -- rededicate ourselves to this principle and to unstinting service to our country and to its people.

Good afternoon, and Godspeed.

END (AT 12:00 NOON EDT)