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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA  
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES

PHILADELPHIA CIVIC CENTER

3:40 P.M. EDT

President Meyerson, distinguished honoraries, distinguished guests, members of the faculty, parents, friends, graduating seniors of the class of 1975, and fellow alumni of the University of Pennsylvania:

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

Let me reiterate, if I might, and thank you most sincerely for the honor and the pleasure of speaking here today to the graduating class of the University of Pennsylvania, one of America's great educational complexes consisting of 16 institutions of higher learning and personal enlightenment -- 17 if you include Snokey Joe's. (Laughter)

I have only been here for a few hours today, but one of the things I have come to recognize and to admire in all Penn students is your ability to keep things in perspective.

The way I see it, in an age that puts such a premium on drive, ambition, competition and the need to excel, any campus that has a sculpture called "We Lost" can't be all bad. (Laughter)

I am very delighted to be here on this momentous occasion in the history of the University of Pennsylvania.

Two hundred years ago, the members of the Second Continental Congress adjourned their sessions and marched over in a body to participate in the graduation ceremonies of your great institution. I congratulate you on this unique bit of history. From my experience, it is not all that easy to get a Congress to march together on anything.

I do congratulate today's graduates, but if my congratulations are to have any real meaning, I must relate the past to the present, and our national goals to your individual goals.

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It is a very special privilege to address a university whose growth has always been oriented toward the future. Your medical school, your school of business, and other departments of the University of Pennsylvania testify to a timely response to the needs of the community by equipping individuals to become problem solvers.

Your illustrious founder, Benjamin Franklin, conceived a university as a center where an individual can find fulfillment through the individual's own efforts.

Franklin did not see schools as the purveyors of all the answers. He saw them constantly responding to the needs of the community rather than conforming scholars to the rigid classic mold.

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Franklin's own life was a continuous self-educational process. Practical wisdom was his aim. We find nowhere in his writings the false concept of the completion of education. He saw no limitations to what an individual could learn.

When eight bachelors and four masters received their degrees here 200 years ago, the Continental Congress was groping its way to a fateful decision as to the direction this country should take in the future, but there was also much talk of the past, for the delegates were determined not to repeat its mistakes.

One of the young commencement speakers in 1775 held forth on "The Fall of the Empires," which he attributed to excesses of luxury, venality and vice. He was not far wrong, and he wound up by looking far into the future and expressing the hope -- his hope -- for America -- that amidst the wide waste of empires, this one corner of the globe may at least remain the last asylum of truth, righteousness and freedom.

Freedom was on everybody's lips that day in May, 1775, just as it is in May of 1975. The news of Lexington and Concord, though nearly a month had passed, had just reached Philadelphia newspapers, but there was, by no means, unanimity for independence.

Indeed, I suspect if there had been a public opinion poll in those days, they probably would have showed a great majority of Americans considered themselves loyal Englishmen and wanted no war.

As we read the record of 1775, we find a spirited debate. It was actually in progress right here on this campus, as well as in the nearby deliberations of the Continental Congress, between the proponents of individual liberty and independence, and the defenders of discipline and order.

In the long, long perspective of two centuries, it is clear to us today that both sides were right. The American Revolution was not a single shot fired or heard round the world. It was, as John Adams warned, a long, obstinate and bloody war that lasted six and a half years, followed by another period of political experimentation in which the weak and divided infant Nation barely survived.

But the most remarkable thing about the beginnings of our Nation is that the men of the revolution stuck to it until it was finished.

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Their mutual pledges of their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor were more than empty words in breaking with the past. They did not neglect to build a better system for their posterity.

Today, we look back 200 years, not merely to take pride in our history -- although we do -- not merely to mark the high priority which Americans have always accorded to education and higher learning -- although we do -- we look back during this Bicentennial to learn some practical lessons for today and tomorrow.

As a Nation, we have recently gone through some very rough times. We have experienced military and diplomatic setbacks, but Washington and Franklin survived experiences far, far worse.

Inflation, high prices, unemployment, recession -- all of these problems were more pressing in 1775 than they are in 1975, that is if one believes the rhetoric of the Continental Congress and the lively report of the colonial press.

But these are not the real lessons of the American revolution. The real lesson of our revolution is that national goals can be achieved only through a combination of national purpose and of national will.

The thirteen colonies in the very beginning were weak militarily, dependent economically, and divided politically. Gradually, they found their goals and articulated their purpose -- in Tom Jefferson's words, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But the national will that saw the struggle through to its successful conclusion was better expressed by the patriotic farmer who said, as he picked up his musket, "We'll see who is going to own this farm."

I believe that spirit is very much alive in America today.

I am immensely proud of the Marines, the airmen and the seamen who rescued their captured countrymen. Their skill and courage, their dedication and sacrifice makes us all humbly grateful and very glad that a greater danger was averted.

But we must not forget that the jubilant cheers that greeted the pealing of the Liberty Bell were followed by the trial and testing of Valley Forge.

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National will comes from a consensus of national purpose, from the collective agreement among thinking citizens as to the goals they seek as a Nation.

A free people will never find unanimity, but a people must be united in the pursuit of certain common goals in order to remain free.

The goals that were proclaimed here in Philadelphia, after a dozen years of war and wrestling with the problems of a new kind of self-government society, are as valid today as they were in 1787: To form a more perfect Union; establish justice; insure domestic tranquility; provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare; and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

We need add to these original goals only the implicit one of striving to preserve and to advance the cause of peace and harmony among all nations and all peoples.

We do not need nobler or newer goals. We do need a renewed sense of national purpose and a strengthening of our national will to pursue these goals.

In a sense, our American Revolution was never ended. We are unique people in that we are at the same time eminently practical and incurably idealistic.

Americans are always more interested in the future than in the past. We expect and we demand that tomorrow will be better than today.

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While I have spoken of national goals, I know that each of you, and rightly so, have individual goals, and that the celebration of this day is clouded by the immediate problem of furthering those goals by finding meaningful employment.

Almost one million young Americans graduating from institutions of higher learning this year are faced, through no fault of their own, with economic difficulties greater than any since the period of my own commencement with the Class of 1935.

As President, my first objective has been to overcome current economic problems. Our national goal is jobs for all who want to work and economic opportunity for all to want to achieve.

Government -- your Government and mine -- must follow policies that enable and encourage the private economic system to create more meaningful jobs in the real world. Greater productivity is the only sure way to greater prosperity and a better life for everybody.

Yes, we are coming out of this recession. We are on our way back and we are on the right track. We cannot be satisfied with simply getting back to where we were, and we will not.

We must redefine, as I see it, our national purposes and pursue them with a renewal of national will. On our 200th birthday, shall we occupy ourselves questioning our limitations or exploring our possibilities?

Shall we conclude from two centuries of American experience that we can do more or that we can do much, much, much more? I think the answer is very simple. We will do the latter. The United States of America that evolved from the uneasy disputations and heated debates here in Philadelphia has now before it a chance to write a new declaration of interdependence among ourselves and with all peoples.

We must infuse our institutions with a new realism built on the old idealism, and we will. We must develop a vast new energy industry that will spur employment and insure economic security, and we will.

We must expand the control of each individual over his or her own life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and we will.

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We must increase the participation and influence of every citizen in the processes of self-government and the shaping of national consensus, and we will.

We must lead humanity's everlasting effort to live harmoniously with nature, employing the technology through the enrichment of spirit as well as body, and we will.

We must sustain and strengthen our alliances and partnerships with other freedom-loving nations as we seek cooperation and rational relations with all peoples, and we will.

We must maintain our vigilance and our defenses as a symbol of our undiminished devotion to peace in a lawful world, and we will.

Finally, perhaps more importantly, we must declare again the brotherly love in which this great Commonwealth was founded. We must learn to trust one another and to help one another.

We must pledge anew to one another our lives, our fortunes and our own sacred honor, and we will.

Benjamin Franklin told the Constitutional Convention, in those early years that much of the strength and efficiency of any government in procuring and securing happiness to the people depends on the general opinion of the goodness of that government as well as the wisdom and the integrity of its Governors.

As President, I value your good opinion and hope always to deserve it, and I ask the graduates of 1975 to work with me on America's new agenda, just as the class of 1775 joined in proclaiming a new era of liberty and hope.

They did well by us. We must do even better by Americans yet unborn.

Thank you.

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(AT 4:02 P.M. EDT)