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Office of the White House Press Secretary

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THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE  
GRADUATION EXERCISES AT THE  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

Michie Stadium

I am deeply honored to be here. The traditions of West Point run throughout our history. The long gray line has extended from here to the ends of the world. And now you accept that inheritance -- carrying with you not only the traditions of West Point but the hopes of your countrymen.

For two centuries, the United States Army has stood for freedom, since this Academy's founding in 1802, West Point has provided leaders for that army. The purpose of the army and West Point today are one and the same -- as they were at their historic foundings: to be ready at the Nation's call to carry out -- with dedication and honor -- the duty of defending the liberty of our land and our people.

The battle for freedom will take many forms in the years ahead. The will of America will always be tested. It is our job -- yours and mine -- to be prepared for those tests.

In recent weeks I have come to realize, as never before, how closely the free world watches the United State of America. Nations observe our example and leadership in meeting the tremendous challenges of maintaining the peace and the momentum of economic progress.

At the same time I have seen how much depends upon the skill and superior professionalism of those who serve the United States either in uniform or as civilian representatives of our country. The tremendous productivity of America's farms and factories, the sophistication of our technology and and the durability of our political institutions all arouse the envy and admiration of friend and foe abroad.

But our one really essential resource is our people -- our dedication to our national interest and national purpose.

You may have read or heard that our allies and other overseas friends have questioned the continuing resolve and unity of our government and our people and that I went to Europe to give them reassurance.

Fortunately, I did not find that degree of doubt among the leaders with whom I met requiring such extensive reassurance, nor would mere words be enough to convince these practical political leaders. What has impressed them and what will impress them are demonstrations of the essential unity of America in the pursuit of our national goals at home and abroad.

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One such practical demonstration will be the fate of the 1976 defense budget which I proposed to the Congress. Because the United States is today at peace, there are some who want to cut back on defense spending and put these dollars into their own pet domestic projects. The hard fact is that we have consistently done this in recent years while our potential adversaries have consistently increased their military budgets.

In real terms, our defense spending has dropped to its lowest level since before the Korean conflict. It is my firm conviction that we cannot afford further erosion of our bedrock defense budget. And I will fight hard to prevent it.

I believe the American people want a national defense posture that is second to none, one that will maintain our qualitative superiority now and in the future; one that will be sufficient to ensure peace through the mutually-honored commitments we have with reliable allies and through the dedication of the highly-motivated and professional military establishment which you are about to enter as officers.

It is instructive to recall that this Academy was founded during the Jefferson Administration. Thomas Jefferson was consistently suspicious of large standing armies; ardent in his insistence on civilian authority over the military. Nevertheless, he was a champion of quality and educational excellence. President Jefferson knew that freedom's defense could not be entrusted to amateurs in a world of expansionist powers and opportunist pirates. Whatever price our poor and youthful republic had to pay for its full independence and the protection of its lawful interests, Jefferson and the Congresses of his day were willing to pay.

I believe the Americans of 1975 are just as willing to pay that price. That is why I continue to press for a comprehensive ten-year program to develop enough domestic energy to make the United States fully independent of foreign oil at externally fixed prices that threaten both our economic health and our national security.

This would be another convincing demonstration to our allies and to our adversaries that Americans have lost neither their nerve nor their national will.

All of the encouraging declarations of commitment to mutual defense and mutual progress which I heard at the NATO Summit Conference in Brussels last week will be meaningless unless the industrial democracies have assured sources of energy to power both their economic and military efforts, once again, the United States is looked to for leadership and example.

Of course energy independence is going to cost us something. Of course an adequate level of defense is going to cost us something. But the price of sacrifice is far less than the price of failure. Freedom is never free; but without freedom, nothing else has value.

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No previous graduating class in the history of West Point will be called upon to fill so many different roles and to perform so many exacting missions as the Class of 1975.

Like those who preceded you, you must know military strategy, tactics and logistics. You must master the increasingly complex machinery of warfare. You must learn the lessons of leadership.

But today as never before you will need a sense of history, a grasp of economic principles, an appreciation of science, a mastery of geopolitics and diplomatic conventions. The Commander-in-Chief can state a policy and issue an order; but only disciplined and dedicated subordinates can successfully carry it out.

You must also understand that in the complexities of today's world, we must pursue complex policies. We must be at the same time both strong and conciliatory. While we must at all times maintain a defense second to none, we must also pursue better relations with our adversaries. Detente, to be effective, must be a two-way street, producing benefits for each side based on genuine efforts of both sides.

To combine the qualities of good citizen and good soldier, the ability to lead and the ability to obey leadership; to use your own intellectual powers and judgement to the fullest within the stern demands of discipline and duty; these are personal challenges worthy of the highest callings to which man aspires.

I know that you will meet them as have all the West Pointers who pledged themselves to duty, honor, and country.

As a young Congressman, I was one who urged one of your greatest graduates to return from Europe and campaign for election as President of the United States. I remember listening to General Eisenhower speak of the importance of those three words in his own distinguished career.

He kept them in the forefront of his thoughts during his years as President; it was his devotion to duty, honor and country that brought peace to the world, respect to America and progress for all our people during his eight years in the White House.

I thought of President Eisenhower often during my visit to Europe; how he led millions of Americans and allied forces to liberate Western Europe; how he returned to uniform, to organize and command the first NATO defenses while Europe rebuilt itself; and how he led diligently for peaceful and positive relationships with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe throughout his Presidency. To all these great responsibilities he brought the totalities of leadership and dedication to duty for which you have been trained these past four years.

Not all of us will be called upon to make the great decisions that President Eisenhower made. But each of us will be called upon to make decisions upon which the welfare of our country may depend. I congratulate you as you enter upon that challenge and opportunity for service to the Army and to America.

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Your career will exact high dues: Periodic dangers, separation from loved ones, moves so frequent that you may have trouble putting down roots anywhere. But it will also offer unique opportunities. It is unlikely that any of your civilian contemporaries of the classes of 1975 will so soon face the challenges which some of you may face within weeks. You will be charged with the upkeep and operation of technology more expensive and complex than some Americans will ever handle. More important, you will be responsible for the well-being of other Americans, sometimes in situations where your decisions mean the difference between life and death. Your apprenticeship, with its basic education is ending; but you may be expected to use its lessons at any time. It is an enormous human test, but testing makes men as well as nations stronger and more confident.

Having met the test of World War II, Dwight D. Eisenhower said in 1946 that "We must not look upon strength as a sin: We must look upon it as a necessity -- but only one of the contributions we are making to the development of a peaceful world."

As you know, last night I returned from a trip to Europe to strengthen the peace. It was most encouraging at the summit meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty nations to find a new sense of unity and a confidence in the United States. It was most inspiring to receive from His Holiness Pope Paul VI the admonition that right and justice must guide all our efforts. I am convinced our major alliances are strong and firm; I am convinced our allies' confidence in us is not misplaced. I am convinced our cause is just and right.

In Salzburg, I met with Egypt's President Sadat, to continue our exploration of new steps toward peace in the Middle East. That is the most serious international issue of our time. The United States is in a unique position to help promote a peaceful solution -- and I assure you we will make that effort.

The American commitment to freedom since World War II -- the sweep of a generation -- has been so vast and enduring that it serves no purpose for me to recount it here. But it does serve a purpose to remind ourselves, our friends and our potential adversaries that Americans are still prepared to pay the price of freedom -- that we will honor our commitments -- that we will do our duty.

This is why I am here today at West Point. This is why you are here today. Let us renew together our Founding Fathers' pledge to our country of our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor. And let us always remember that freedom is never free.

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