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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AT THE  
1975 GRADUATION EXERCISES OF  
WEST POINT MILITARY ACADEMY

MICHIE STADIUM

10:03 A.M. EDT

General Berry, Senator Mathias, Congressmen Montgomery, Fish and Gilman, Secretary of the Army Callaway, members of the graduating class, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen:

On March 26 of this year, at the White House ceremony, I had the very great honor to present the American Cancer Society's award to one of the outstanding members of this graduating class, the captain of the Army's football team, Cadet Robert E. Johnson.

I, obviously, don't have to tell you how richly deserving of this award Bob Johnson is. As the ceremony ended, Bob urged me to visit the Military Academy at West Point, and quite frankly, I didn't need much urging.

It is certain, I am sure, in your minds that I am delighted to be here with you this morning. But let me transform that delight into a more practical form of expression.

It has become a time-honored tradition at the Academy that a visiting head of State is entitled to grant remissions of certain punishments. (Laughter) I don't know who started this tradition, but as General Douglas MacArthur once said, "The long gray line has never failed us," and today I am not going to fail the long gray line.

So, with the powers vested in me as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, I hereby order the remission of all ordinary punishments immediately and without delay. (Laughter)

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I thought you might be interested in something else that happened after the White House ceremony that I previously mentioned. When it was over, Bob Johnson and Homer Smith -- Army's distinguished head football coach -- had lunch at the White House with a few of the other participants in the ceremony.

Homer Smith found himself sitting beside someone who he later described as "this nice looking girl," but he didn't know her name. So Homer leaned over and asked her. She said, "Raquel." (Laughter) He said, "Raquel?" What is your last name?" (Laughter) She said, "Welch."

Now, if you are wondering how anyone could describe Raquel Welch as just a nice looking girl-- (Laughter) I think you have to understand the very special philosophy of football coaches. (Laughter) I know, because a long time ago I was one myself. To a football coach real beauty is anyone who is 6 feet 5 (Laughter), weighs 260 pounds, and has no front teeth. (Laughter)

Homer, I hope you found a lot of them for this fall. I wish you and the Army one of your very best seasons, and that comes from a former Navy man. (Laughter)

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 with honor the duty of defending the liberty of our land and our people.

The battle of 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 become cognizant -- I have come to realize as never before how closely the free world watches the United States of America. Nations observe our example and our leadership in meeting the tremendous challenges of maintaining the peace and the momentum of economic progress.

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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 the durability of our political institutions all arouse the envy and the admiration of friend and foe abroad.

But our one really essential resource is our people -- our dedication to our 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 as well as our people, and that I went to Europe to give them reassurance. Fortunately, I did not find that the degree of doubt among the leaders with whom I met requiring such extensive reassurance, nor would mere words be enough to convince these very 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, both at home and abroad.

One such practical demonstration will be the fate of the 1976 defense budget which I proposed to the Congress in January. Because the United States today is at peace, there are some who want to cut back on defense spending and put these dollars into their own pet domestic programs.

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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 in our bedrock defense budget, and I, for one, will fight hard to prevent it.

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

I think it is instructive to recall that this Academy was founded during the Jefferson Administration. Thomas Jefferson was consistently suspicious of large-standing armies, and an ardent supporter in his insistence on civilian authority over the military.

Nevertheless, Thomas Jefferson 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 opportunistic pirates.

Whatever price our poor and youthful Republic had to pay for its full independence and the protection of its lawful interest, Jefferson and the Congresses of his day -- and, I might add, the people -- were willing to pay.

I believe that the Americans of 1975 are just as willing to pay that same 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 and externally fixed prices that threaten both our economic health and our national security.

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

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All of the encouraging declarations of commitments 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 themselves of sources of energy to power both their economic and their military efforts. Once again, the United States is looked to for leadership and for 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.

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.

Each of you must understand that in the complexities of today's world, we must, of necessity, 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 citizens and good soldiers, the ability to lead and the ability to obey leadership, to use your intellectual powers and the judgment to the fullest within the stern demands of discipline and duty -- these are the personal challenges worthy of the highest callings to which man aspires.

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

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As a young Congressman, I was one who urged your greatest graduate 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 recent visit to Europe, how he led millions of Americans and allied forces to liberate Western Europe, how he returned in uniform to organize and command the first NATO defenses while Europe rebuilt itself, and how he searched diligently for peaceful and positive relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe throughout his Presidency.

To all of these great responsibilities, he brought the qualities of leadership and dedication; leadership and dedication to duty for which you have been trained for the past four years.

Not all of us will be called upon to make the great decisions that President Eisenhower had to make, 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 accept that challenge and that opportunity for service to the Army and to America. Your career will exact high dues: Periodic danger, separation from loved ones, and moves so frequent you may have trouble putting down your roots anywhere.

But, it will also offer unique opportunities. It is unlikely that any of your civilian contemporaries of the Class of 1975 will so soon face the challenges which some of you may face within a few weeks.

You will be charged with the upkeep and operation of technology, more expensive and more complex than some Americans will ever handle in their lifetime.

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.

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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 far more confident.

Having met the test of World War II, Dwight David Eisenhower said in 1946, and I quote, "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 some of you may know, last night, or early this morning, 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, a new sense of 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 that our major alliances are strong and firm. I am convinced that our allies' confidence in us is not misplaced. I am confident that our cause is just and right.

In Salzburg, I met with Egypt's President Sadat to continue our exploration of new steps towards peace in the Middle East. That, of course, 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 a major effort in that regard.

The American commitment to freedom since World War II -- the sweep of a generation -- has been so vast and so 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.

That is why I am here today at West Point. You have beautiful buildings, tremendous individuals, cadets, professors, others. West Point has unbelievably great traditions and West Point, on the record, has superb traditions for which we are all proud. That is why all of us are here today in the process of paying tribute to all of this class.

But as we pay that tribute, 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.

Thank you very much.

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(AT 10:29 A.M. EDT)