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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 AT FLAG DAY/  
ARMY BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION  
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

This is a great day for the Army and for all Americans. And it is a special honor for me to be here at Fort Benning, Home of the Infantry. I join a grateful Nation in saluting the United States Army on its 200th year of service and sacrifice to our country.

On this day, in 1775--a year before America's independence--our Second Continental Congress created the American Army. To have meaning, the deliberations and debates of Independence Hall had to be backed up by strength. The decisions made there had to be defended at Bunker Hill and on a dozen other battlefields across this new Nation.

It was a bold step from which there could be no retreat. It was a recognition of the realities of the world in which the colonists lived--and in which we live today: that there are times when principles must be defended with the force of arms.

Since that day, in 1775, our soldiers have protected and preserved this Nation at home and throughout the world.

There is much that I will always remember about this visit. But perhaps the one thing that best sums up the spirit of this day is the simple but deeply moving statue here at Fort Benning of an American combat infantryman. The statue bears the infantry's motto -- only two short words. But it speaks volumes for the courage and sacrifice that the American fighting man has always demonstrated. The motto is, "Follow me." It is this "Follow me" spirit, this sense of courage, leadership and sacrifice, that has characterized the American Army from its beginning as a ragged band of citizen volunteers, united only in love of liberty and a deep sense of duty.

Very few people thought that this citizen's army had much of a future in 1775. After all, the colonies had no allies and only limited industrial resources. And the adversary was the greatest global military power of the 18th century.

Yet, there were some who sensed from the start that, for all its weaknesses and handicaps, this was no ordinary army -- and that the goal it served was something special, perhaps even unique, in the annals of history.

On June 15, two hundred years ago tomorrow, the Continental Congress chose a commander for its new army -- a tall, quiet Virginian. In a letter to his wife, Martha, George Washington expressed his personal faith in the mission he and his fledgling army were about to undertake together.

"It is a kind of destiny," he wrote, "that has thrown me upon this service." And that destiny saw Washington and his men march from the harsh winter and privation of Valley Forge to the ultimate victory of Yorktown.

That first American Army faced many obstacles and some defeats. But it had one enduring trait -- it wouldn't quit. The mainstay of Washington's revolutionary force was the will to be free and the willingness to pay the price of freedom. Today's Army continues in that tradition.

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Although we still enjoy the freedom which the Continental Army won for us, we have also learned over the years that freedom is never free. Each subsequent generation, in its own time and its own way, has answered the call to service and sacrifice to preserve our legacy of liberty.

Today's generation is no exception. And one of the most important contributions it has made is a physically and morally strong United States Army -- an army that is worthy of the heritage of two centuries of heroes.

Like the men of 1775, you who serve today are volunteers. With your comrades in the other services, you are the guardians of both our peace and our liberties. For, if we are to avoid war, we must maintain a credible and ready fighting force. Today's realities have increased, rather than reduced, our need for a solid conventional fighting force and for strong and ready infantry soldiers such as these I see here today.

In today's world, as in the world of George Washington, weakness is a provocation to aggression. It took strength to win our freedom; it will take strength to keep it, and to preserve the peace. The American soldier has paid the price of freedom on countless battlefields around the world.

For my part, I will do everything I can to see that our servicemen and women continue to receive the recognition and respect that is their due. And I will continue to work with the Congress to keep our armed forces supplied with the best and most modern training, weapons and equipment in the world.

In the short time I have spent here at Fort Benning, I have seen and felt the pride and vitality of the modern volunteer soldier. Last week, I flew to West Point to give the graduation address there. My old friend and former colleague in the Congress, Secretary Callaway, was along then as he is today. I asked Bo, while we were in Air Force One, how the all-volunteer force was doing. Well, it's a good thing it was a short flight because when Bo gets to talking about the success of the all-volunteer Army, he just won't quit. But I can see here today why he's so excited -- and I share his enthusiasm.

From my days in the Congress, I can well remember the spirited debate and the concern expressed over the establishment of an all-volunteer Army. An all-volunteer Army of 782,000 soldiers was considered by many to be impractical at best and impossible at worst. I can remember one of my congressional colleagues saying: "The only way to get good volunteers . . . is to draft them."

Well, as so often happens, the doubters were wrong. Today's Army is not only an Army of volunteers. It's an Army of winners. And it is truly representative of the American people. As a matter of fact, the Army is attracting better educated, better qualified, and higher skilled young men and women into its ranks than ever before. And most importantly, from what I see here today and have observed elsewhere, this new Army has kept intact that esprit de corps which 200 years of history and tradition have instilled.

Seeing so many flags proudly flying here reminds me of the fact that, besides marking the 200th Anniversary of the Army, today is also Flag Day. As I travel across America, I am proud to see that more and more people are displaying the flag in their yards, their cars, their places of business. Perhaps the spirit of the Bicentennial has caught hold. Whatever the reason, let us never forget that the flag we honor today embodies 200 years of experiences of a great people. It symbolizes this Nation's history. As President Woodrow Wilson once said about the flag, "no man can rightly serve under that flag who has not caught some of the meaning of that history." Each of us in our daily lives -- in our sense of patriotism and purpose -- can add to that history and the flag that embodies it.

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For, when you get right down to it, the most remarkable thing about America is not the fact that we have produced great leaders. Other nations and other civilizations have done as much.

What's unique is the way in which generation after generation of Americans -- working men and women from all national, racial, regional and religious backgrounds -- have joined together to build a new Nation and new lives for themselves. The great lesson of America is that, in a free society like ours, the so-called "common man" can rise to uncommon heights of heroism sacrifice and achievement.

That is what the American flag stood for 200 years ago and what it still stands for today -- the integrity and worth of the individual citizen. And that is what each of you are sworn to defend.

From 13 stars, the flag has grown to 50. From 13 coastal colonies on the edge of an untamed continent, America has grown into the most productive, strongest and freest nation in human history.

But strength of spirit is every bit as important as wealth and territory and material power. What the American flag will stand for tomorrow depends on each of us today.

If we live up to the trust of this Nation's founders and to the dedication of its men in uniform -- and I am confident we will -- then the flag and the Nation we pass on to posterity will still justify Oliver Wendell Holmes' eloquently stated vision -- in his words -- of . . .

"One flag, one land, one heart, one hand, one Nation, evermore!"

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