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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED AT THE
CHICAGO STATE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

I was so moved by the more than 5,000 signatures on the petition inviting me that nothing could have kept me away.

I was impressed not only by the great number of signatures but also by the Chicago State University success story.

C.S.U. serves the urban needs of a great city. Not long ago C.S.U. came under heavy attack. But you effectively answered the challenge. Today C.S.U. is graduating a first-rate, and hopeful class of 1975. You have overcome.

You can today share a justifiable pride. So can the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois, and the entire United States. You proved the critics wrong.

I know of the sacrifices of your husbands and wives, your parents, your grandparents, and even great-grandparents. Some of your guests here today were denied even the opportunity to complete high school. But none can stand taller in American achievement than they do for inspiring and encouraging today's graduates.

To those relatives who never had the chance to attend an institution of higher learning, I say: You have learned the greatest history lesson that the United States of America can teach. You have learned to nourish hope, to sustain belief in a better life for the next generation, to work toward that goal, and to now experience the proof that the American dream is possible for all.

To the graduates, I say: You have made your loved ones proud. You have made Chicago State University proud.

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And you have made me proud to be President of a Nation where graduates like you strive against heavy odds for self-betterment, for equal opportunity, for constructive change and for excellence; where graduates build on abilities rather than cop out on disabilities; where graduates believe in themselves and in the contribution they can make to their community; and where graduates provide a living demonstration of how we are going to turn around the problems of the cities.

Chicago State University is a showcase of what can be done by people with determination. You have shown how white and black hands can unite to build a multi-racial institution. You have shown academic achievement. And you have responded to the real needs of the community you serve.

Most of today's graduates had to work full or part-time on outside jobs. I would like to share a personal experience. As a freshman at the University of Michigan, I worked as a bus boy in the Nurses' cafeteria at the University Hospital. I also waited on tables in the Intern's dining room.

But let me quickly add that, even during the great depression, it was much easier for me. I was not the victim of racial prejudice nor of a deprived environment. So I cannot honestly say that my experience was the same as that of those who are struggling to make it today in Chicago and throughout America. But I do say that my experience leads me to care about and to identify with every upward-bound individual in this Nation.

And I defy anyone to put down the greatest fraternity of them all -- the college graduates who learned something about life by dirtying their hands.

I am deeply concerned about the unemployed of this recession and those now employed beneath the level of their capacities.

A Nation that deprives anyone of an equal opportunity is itself deprived. A Nation that cannot create the conditions for human dignity for all is itself lacking a measure of humanity and dignity.

The dignity of the individual is based ultimately upon a sense of pride. It does not come from government programs that take over the individual's life and reduce the person to a case file and a claim number. Real aid to the individual is aid that helps the individual to help himself or herself. Federal assistance that helps people achieve higher education and qualification is fully justified.

I am told that one of your graduates here today receiving a degree in education is a 45-year-old woman who worked as a teacher's aide. She aspired to teach. With nine children -- one severely handicapped -- it was not easy. But her perseverance is typical of this entire graduating class. So is the spirit of your Vietnam veterans and others who caught up to win degrees today.

The Federal Government can provide financial aid to education. But it cannot give individuals the determination you have displayed in earning your degrees.

As President, I am deeply concerned about the attitude of government toward individuals. But I am also concerned about the attitude of individuals toward the national community -- and toward themselves in terms of personal self-respect.

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I cannot and do not say that we are all in the same boat. Some people are outside the boat struggling in stormy waters. We -- the fortunate -- are in the boat and can throw out a life preserver. We can and will help. But those in the water must not just hang on indefinitely to their life preservers but swim toward rescue.

Real assistance is to help people help themselves. We cannot do everything for everybody. But there is room for all who try to make it. The only soul really lost is the one who gives up without trying.

Many of the problems of the cities remain unsolved. I am dedicated to turning around the trend of deterioration and despair, of crime and unemployment, of pollution and bad housing, and of drugs and of premature death. But I am also dedicated to the conviction that local problems must, in the final analysis, be solved by local people. The Federal Government has helped and will continue to help.

That is why I came to Chicago today to meet you. We in Washington can learn a lot from you. Many of you have overcome a deprived environment and economic limitations. You succeeded because you are rich in human capacities and have the love of families who care. This auditorium is filled with individual success stories. I don't see much reason to worry about the Class of 1975 at C.S.U.

But I am concerned about the future of some other young Americans who are today neither in school nor working at jobs. They are in the streets. Some have lost hope and motivation to the extent that they are no longer even looking for work. Some have police records.

Society has begun to think of them as records and public enemies rather than as human beings in trouble. Some are sick with addiction to drugs because they are so empty inside, so devoid of hope, that they fill themselves with the artificial illusion of contentment.

So I challenge today's graduates to use your new skills to help the people who are not in this hall today. You are uniquely equipped. I challenge the graduates in education to teach young people how to read and write. I challenge the graduates in the Liberal Arts to stimulate the mind and inspire the spirit.

I challenge the graduates in Corrections and Law Enforcement to counsel and motivate individuals from the path of destruction of themselves and others.

I challenge the Business and Administration graduates to conceive of new jobs that are more interesting, challenging, and rewarding.

And I challenge all graduates to set an example that gives hope to the millions who have not yet made it. You have demonstrated that your determination can make a difference. You might have been part of the problem. But now you are part of the pride.

C.S.U. has shown that a new tradition can emerge from problem areas. Your President, Dr. Alexander, made C.S.U. a school that demands performance of its students. He made C.S.U. a school where you shape up or ship out.

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I agree with the C. S. U. philosophy. You kill pride if students are passed merely because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is no favor. It is a disservice. You sacrifice for an education. You are entitled to a fair chance to learn. C. S. U. is not a school where the student can coast through for four years, and emerge with a degree but without competence.

The pursuit of excellence makes more valid the diplomas you are receiving today. It is a service to the University, to the students, and to the community. You welcomed the challenge. You made the grade.

A united America requires opportunities for all citizens and cooperation of all races and groups. That is why I draw such encouragement from the achievements of this graduating class. You are the individuals who will provide new energy, new ideas, and new leadership to help resolve the plight of the cities.

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