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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
BEFORE THE  
VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

THE OLD CAPITOL

4:05 P.M. EST

Mr. Speaker, Governor Godwin, Mr. Justice Powell, members of the Virginia Congressional delegation, delegates to the General Assembly, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am highly honored to speak before this special joint session of the Virginia General Assembly-- my first address of 1976 devoted to the National Bicentennial. Your Assembly is the most appropriate forum in America for a discussion of self-government in the 200th year of our nationhood. Today, in this Hall of the House of Burgesses, you continue our oldest representative legislative body, a living shrine of the American heritage.

There would be no Bicentennial without the concept of self-government which began in Virginia in 1619. We meet today where the representatives of the people of Virginia perfected America's legislative process. It was here that brave civilians challenged the oppression of a distant and responsive regime that sought to impose taxation without representation and government without the concept of the governed.

The Virginians created a new way of life strikingly different from the lives of the common people of Europe of that day. When the first settlers landed at nearby Jamestown, they brought the seeds of an idea that would make men strive for local control over the fate of local people.

America's most moving chronicle is how Virginians defied the centralized authority represented by royal governors and tax collectors appointed by a king on another continent. The momentous events that began in Virginia culminated in this great Bicentennial.

The process that started in 1619 led to Patrick Henry's defiant outcry for liberty or death, to George Mason's Virginia declaration of rights, to Thomas Jefferson's role in formulating our Declaration of Independence, and the services of yet another member of Burgesses, George Washington, as Commander-in-Chief and the first President of the United States of America.

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As 38th President, I commend those whose initiative and patriotism has preserved and restored Colonial Williamsburg. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation serves the world by vividly reconstructing America's heritage.

Yet, in this Bicentennial year, we must do much more than maintain the treasured structures of our national legacy. We must revive the cherished values of the American Revolution with a resurgence of the spirit that rang forth in the streets of Williamsburg in Colonial times. I commend the instructive creed of the Colonial Williamsburg foundation: "That the future may learn from the past." We venerate the contributions of the founding fathers with timely and appropriate words of tribute. To keep faith, we must strive for the responsible self-government that they sought.

Patrick Henry, advocating national unity in Philadelphia, said: "I am not a Virginian, but an American." I believe that Patrick Henry would take one look at today's America and proclaim: "I am not only an American, but also a Virginian who believes in local control over the fate of local people."

George Washington warned against the danger of the centralized power of Government. Yet we find ourselves in the Bicentennial year when we look back with something less than pleasure at the erosion of State and local authority. Indeed, America has now reached the point where the Federal establishment employs over 3 million people. This is more than the combined population of all the 13 original States when the Virginia Convention reserved to your people and to your State Government all power not bestowed upon the national Government.

The founding fathers understood that a self-governing republic could not exist if people did not possess the traditional virtues of self-discipline, self-reliance and a patriotic concern for the public good. "Republican Government," said James Madison, "pre-supposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form."

In earlier years, the American political system worked so well that we accepted it as a tradition. We did not question why it worked. We assumed only that its magical providence would continue forever. In the 18th century, Jefferson and Adams agreed that self-government, as they understood it, involved a lifestyle dependent on qualities they called "Republican virtues" -- attributes that would make democracy possible.

When our State Constitutions were adopted, great care was taken to preserve fundamental principles of self-government. The States demonstrated that the real strength of American self-rule is that truly free people do not make a contract with a centralized Government but only among themselves.

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The founding fathers favored what they called "mild Government." Their premise was that you can only achieve "mild Government" if you maintain local Government so responsive that the National Government is limited in scope. They believed in the ability of individuals to govern themselves. In recent years during an era of rapid change, more and more people looked to Washington to solve local problems. The view of too many was that the world's richest and most powerful Nation could do anything and do it instantly. Too much was expected and too much was promised.

Can you really expect a huge Government to give you everything but to take away nothing? Can we afford massive taxes to finance not only rising expectations, but also rising entitlements? I refer to the escalation of material things some citizens feel automatically entitled to, without regard to their own efforts or to their personal contribution to the economy.

Freedom is now misinterpreted by too many to mean the instantaneous reform of all social and economic inequality at the public expense through the instrumentality of the Federal Government.

In pursuit of that quest, the Federal bureaucracy was expanded. Power was drained away from the towns, from the cities, from the States to an increasingly centralized National Government -- always bigger, always more powerful--- though not always more efficient.

If this course is pursued, it will mean much less incentive to create capital and jobs and much more inflation. Two hundred years ago, men of vision understood that poverty is abolished by economic growth, not by economic redistribution. They knew that only a self-disciplined person can create a society in which ordered liberty will promote both economic prosperity and political participation at every level.

The founding of America was more than a political event. It was an act of political faith, a promise to Americans and to the entire world. Inherent in the Declaration of Independence was the message people can govern themselves, they can live in freedom with equal rights, they can also act in accord with reason and restraint and for the respect of the rights of others and the total community.

As we celebrate this Bicentennial, some citizens continue to glorify instant gratification over everything else. Some seek change merely for the sake of change and some heed emotional desire rather than common sense.

Our Nation's founders believed that civic virtue was a willingness to suspend the pursuit of immediate personal interest and personal gain for the common good.

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An excellent theme for this Bicentennial would be the revival of civic virtue.

American self-government is the most stirring and successful political experiment in history, but its ultimate success requires new concentration on duties and responsibilities as well as demands and desires.

We must regain the same willingness to work as those who built a colonial capital on this site, the same open mind as those who envisioned our freedom, the same sense of responsibility as those who preserved it. We must enshrine our rights but carry out our duties.

Let us evaluate what is possible with the common sense balance of what is practical.

As a young Congressman, I listened in the 1950's to the warnings of President Eisenhower. He said unless we preserve the traditional power and basic responsibilities of State Government, we would not retain the kind of America previously known. We would have, instead, quite another kind of America.

The pendulum has swung since very far in the direction that President Eisenhower feared, but I am today confident that the will of the people, voiced here and all across America, is beginning to bring the pendulum of power back to the balanced center.

The preservation of the 50 States as vigorous units of Government is vital to individual freedom and the growth of real national strength and character. Yet, it is useless to advocate States' rights without simultaneously honoring the responsibilities of the States. An objective reassessment of State responsibilities can reduce central authority while strengthening State and local Governments. The States can regain and reassert traditional rights and responsibilities if we remove the Federal barriers to responsive Government, restore responsible taxing and fiscal systems and encourage local initiative. But if the States fail to act, Federal power will move even more deeply into a new vacuum created by political expediencies and pressures.

We must, above all, see that Government remains responsive to the real and legitimate needs of the American people. And we must make sure that in meeting those needs, each level of Government performs its proper function -- no more and no less. This is essential to preserve our system and to draw new energy from the source of all governmental power -- the people.

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Before the King's agents dissolved the House of Burgesses prior to the American Revolution, members of the Burgesses often disagreed, but they shared a common faith that led to a common glory. It did not matter whether they met in Raleigh's Tavern or in the designated chamber. They trusted one another and worked together in the common interest. They shared their confidence with like-minded people in every other Colony.

This trust is manifest in our flag with its alternate stripes and stars, which share the same galaxy. It is inherent in every presumption on which our free system is based. Much has changed in American life. Yet, the Bicentennial can remind us of those values we must preserve and the mutual cooperation and confidence that we must restore.

Any real Bicentennial observance demands the capture of the new spirit from the old. It is the redemption, in a new reality, of the essence of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, of the Declaration of Independence and of the United States Constitution. These documents are something more than compacts of Government. They were, and still are, expressions of the will and the spirit of the people.

If the Bicentennial is to be more than a colorful, historical pageant, we must restore, on local and State level, the opportunity for individuals to have more say in how their taxes are spent, in how they live and how they work, and how they fight crime and how they go to school.

Should the Bicentennial accomplish nothing else, this alone would be a resounding triumph -- a fitting tribute to our heritage.

I believe in America as all of you do. I reaffirm my faith in the unique value of a government of shared responsibility. I believe in our capacity to foster diversity with unity, to encourage innovation and creativity, both privately as well as publicly, and to achieve a proper balance between the National and our State Governments. The vision of this House of Burgesses, first expressed 357 years ago in Colonial Virginia, remains vivid. It is a vision of a State and of a Nation where the government serves and the people rule. It is the vision of the supremacy of God and the dedication of man. As George Mason, author of the immortal Declaration of Rights, said of this historic place where we meet today: "We seem to have been treading on enchanted ground."

Thank you for allowing me to share this enchanted ground with you in this enchanted year.

Thank you very much.

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(AT 4:25 P.M. EST)