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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT
WILLIAMS PARK

11:00 A.M. EST

Thank you very, very much, Bill Young, a very dear friend of mine. I am most grateful for that really warm welcome and very, very kind words.

Congressman Lou Frey, Congressman Skip Bafalis, Mayor Schuh, Senator Ware, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Happy Valentine. I hope you have many, many, many more happy Valentines.

In 1952 Winston Churchill, then a mere 77 years old, had been called into the service of a country for a second term as Prime Minister of Great Britain. Smiling impishly, he told the British House of Commons, and I quote, "Everyone has his day, and some days last longer than others."

I am happy to be here today with so many people who are enjoying a long and sunny day in the Sunshine City of St. Petersburg in the Sunshine State of Florida.

The careers of Winston Churchill and others who rose to prominence in their later years reminds us all, if we need to be reminded, that advancing years need not mean a retreat from an active, eventful and enjoyable life, and all of you represent the best of that.

Nor should advancing years be the certain bearer of poor health, meager income or social isolation. The ancient philosophers taught us that the measure of civilization's advancement can be found in the treatment of its elderly.

For more than 40 years, through the vehicle of Social Security and other programs, America has made a firm commitment of support for older citizens of our society.

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I pledge to you this morning that I will continue to uphold that commitment. In recent years, there has been dramatic progress in our efforts to meet the continuing needs of America's older generation. But, I want to do better, and with your help and with the help of the Congress, I will, and I am sure we will.

As President, I intend to do everything in my power to help our Nation demonstrate its deep concern for the dignity and the well being of our older generations. For those who need our help we have already a number of Federal programs providing assistance in a variety of ways.

The Social Security program, the largest of its kind in this world, will pay almost \$83 billion to more than 32 million Americans in fiscal year 1977. That is more than a \$10 billion increase over the current year.

Here in Florida the Social Security Trust Fund will pay an estimated \$4 billion 400 million to participants in the next fiscal year. In my budget for fiscal year 1977, I am recommending that the full cost of living increase in Social Security benefits be paid during the coming year.

Now, let me assure you of one thing very emphatically. My Administration fully intends to preserve the integrity and the solvency of the Social Security system for your benefit and that of all working Americans, men and women, now as well as in the future.

I think that is good news, but now let's have some bad news.

This year it is projected that the Social Security Trust Fund will run a deficit of about \$3 billion. Next year, unless my reforms are adopted, we will run a deficit of \$3.5 billion. If this trend continues, there will be no Social Security for old or young.

As long as I am President, we are going to keep Social Security protection and every other retirement program strong, sound and certain, and we will do it.

Yesterday, the Department of Labor announced that wholesale prices were unchanged in January. In fact, wholesale prices have shown no appreciable change since October of last year.

This is more good news in our fight against inflation, and we are going to keep the pressure on.

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In addition to the Social Security program, we are continuing our strong commitment to benefit programs for more than three million railroad, military and Federal Government employees. Of course, that means we will do the same job for the veterans who live here and live elsewhere in 49 other States.

After many, many years of sacrifice and hard work, you have contributed to America. You have earned the respect, and you have earned more than the prospect of poverty in your retirement years.

In my budget, the Supplemental Security Income program, or SSI, will pay almost \$6 billion in Federal benefits to more than five million disabled and disadvantaged older Americans in 1977, 170,000 of them right here in Florida.

Let's be frank. There have been some problems with this program, as you probably know, because the SSI replaced a great number of Federal assisted State programs and inevitably there was some confusion in the process.

We have already begun to take extensive steps to correct these problems, and we will make sure that if any American qualifies for these benefits, he or she will get them, period.

Those who don't qualify won't be taking money that you should have. In the field of health care, the Federal Medicare program in 1976 will provide more than \$17 billion for the health care of 24 million older and disabled Americans, about 1 million 400 thousand right here in the great State of Florida.

But, there are flaws in this program, which actually help raise the cost of your medical care and which fail to protect you adequately against the economic burdens of prolonged illness.

I have proposed major improvements in the Medicare program to make it serve you better. One of the most important improvements is the creation of a system of health insurance that would pay all but a very small fraction of the catastrophic cost of complex or extended care and treatment.

I don't have to tell you that medical treatment is very, very expensive today. Hospital costs have risen by more than 200 percent since 1965, to an average cost of \$128 per day. If you have to stay in a hospital or a nursing home or under doctor's care for a very, very long time, it puts an incredible strain on your lifetime savings and on your peace of mind, and that strain is felt by your loved ones as well.

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All of us know of cases in which someone in the family or a close friend or a member of your church has been stricken with an illness that lingers on and on and on. We know of the pain and of the heartache associated with a prolonged illness.

We know that being sick and bedridden for a long, long time is bad enough without having a person's income and life savings dwindle away as the medical bills keep piling up.

This must not continue, and it won't, with my program.

Let me put it this way. There is no reason that older Americans should have to go broke just to get well or stay well in the United States of America. Under my proposal the individuals' contribution would go up slightly, but consider what the increase would provide.

Nobody eligible for Medicare would have to pay more than \$500 a year for hospital or nursing home care, and this does not mean that you pay the first \$500 of your total cost. You would pay only 10 percent of the total cost, or \$500, whichever is less, and the maximum annual cost to you for covered doctor's services would be \$250, or 20 percent, whichever is less.

Medicare would pay the rest, whether it costs \$1,000 or \$10,000 or \$50,000. It is a good program, and we are going to make it.

If the Congress passes my program, the ruinous economic burden of catastrophic illness is one thing you will never have to worry about again. Another of my programs would consolidate 16 Federal health programs, including Medicare, into a single \$10 billion block grant program to the States.

If we can consolidate these programs, we can make them more humane and more effective. We can improve the services that they provide to you and millions like you, and we can get those services to more people who really, really need them.

Programs of this kind, despite some abuses, do a tremendous amount of good. For some of our neighbors, they provide the means for life itself. They provide the food, the services, the health care, without which some people would not be able to enjoy this beautiful sunshine today in St. Petersburg and in Florida.

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It is all too easy to say that the Federal Government is too big, that this program and that program ought to be cut out of the Federal budget, tossed back to the States to cope with, if their taxpayers will permit it.

It is not that simple, and you know it and I know it.

I am concerned, as you are, about the growth of the Federal budget. I have been fighting to hold down the Federal budget in a responsible way for 27 years, 25-plus years in the Congress, a few months as Vice President, and approximately 18 months as your President.

You all know how hard I have been trying for the last 18 months to get control of the inflation which has done so much economic damage to all Americans. During 1974, when I became President, inflation was ranging at an annual rate of more than 12 percent, eating away at everybody's buying power but absolutely devouring the livelihood of people on fixed incomes.

I knew that something had to be done to bring that situation under control. I knew that deficit spending by the Federal Government was a major contributor to inflation and that slowing the growth of Federal spending was essential to solving the problem.

I have used my Constitutional power, that of veto, 46 times since becoming President, trying to hold down the level of Federal spending, trying to break the back of inflation. To hold down the cost of living, we must hold down the cost of Government. It is just that simple.

We made some very encouraging progress with these vetoes, saving the taxpayers about \$10 billion. The inflation rate that was 12 percent has been cut nearly in half.

That is not good enough. That is progress, real progress, that helps especially people on fixed incomes more than anybody else in our society.

Just yesterday the Department of Labor announced the wholesale prices stayed level in January. In fact, wholesale prices have shown no appreciable change since October.

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I want to drive that point home. This is more good news in our fight against inflation, and we are going to keep the pressure on, and we are going to be successful.

You probably heard that we had some other good economic news just about a week ago. Employment in January took its sharpest drop in 16 years. Ninety-six percent of all jobs lost during the depression have been recovered.

America is getting back to work, and we are going to make better and better and better progress in reducing unemployment. But, there is so much more that we have to do. I want all Americans, young or old, black or white, rich or poor, to live in dignity and security and in peace.

If we can continue making the progress America has made in the past, we will see that wonderful goal achieved. Too often people forget just how far and how fast we have come as a Nation. We have our problems, and we are not afraid to admit them.

Honesty in this situation is essential, but I think it is time people stop running down America.

I think it is time we remember how richly blessed this Nation is. You, or many of you, in this audience have seen much of America's phenomenal progress with your own eyes. In the space of your lifetime, man has taken himself from the horse and buggy and explored the far reaches of space.

Diseases which were once crippling and killing millions of Americans have now been conquered. America's population has more than doubled since 1910. Life expectancy, which in 1910 was only 50 years, is today more than 71 years.

The Gross National Product, the index of our total production, is now seven times greater than it was in 1910. To put it another way, the strength and growth of the American economy provides the average American living today with three and one-half times more in goods and services than Americans enjoyed in 1910.

No other generation of Americans has achieved such growth, and all of us thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

In 1910, some 156,000 young people graduated from America's high schools. Last year's college graduates totaled 944,000. That is another indication of the progress we are making in this great country.

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In 1910 there was no regularly scheduled radio broadcasting in the United States. Nobody had ever heard of television -- maybe a few very outstanding scientists. Today, we are living in an age of instant and global communications. These examples -- and there are many, many, many more -- serve to remind us of how much has changed, of how much progress there has been in health, wealth, education, communication, law, and in every other aspect of life in our great country.

The fact is that you, your generation, has been the greatest pioneer of progress and change in the entire history of the human race.

But, some things thankfully have not changed at all. We are still a people in America with love of freedom, and after 200 years that love is undiminished. We are still a Nation dedicated to progress and peace in the world, We are still a Nation of compassion. We are still, as Lincoln called us a century ago, "The last, best hope of earth."

The United States is a great country, the greatest in the world. You helped to make it that way, and this Nation will never, never, never forget your contribution, past, present or future.

We will never forget the lesson which President Eisenhower taught us from the wisdom of his years. "America is not good because it is great" -- the President said -- "America is great because it is good."

Thank you very, very much.

END (AT 11:20 A.M. EST)