

FOR RELEASE:
FRIDAY PM's
APRIL 30, 1976

Office of the Vice President

REMARKS OF THE VICE PRESIDENT
AT THE
GEORGE WASHINGTON INAUGURAL CEREMONY
WASHINGTON MONUMENT
Washington, D. C.

April 30, 1976

What took place on this day 187 years ago was more than the inauguration of a new leader. It was the birth of a new nation. And, the birth of that nation could not have happened -- except for the life of that leader.

Historians agree and his contemporaries already knew that without George Washington's towering moral influence, without his unbreakable faith, when there was every reason to lose faith, without his undoubting conviction that America was a unique nation under God's special blessing, the likelihood that this nation would have survived its infancy is highly doubtful.

This 187th anniversary of Washington's inauguration as our first President offers an ideal opportunity to ask how America did survive to become the greatest, freest land in human history, and why it was that Washington had the faith to know it would survive. It is important to know why America succeeded so well in its first two centuries, so that we can carry this imperishable lesson into the next century of our nationhood.

Through his courage, his example, his wisdom and his unshakeable faith, Washington had led America through a successful War of Independence. He had led America through the darkest hour of the Revolution that winter at Valley Forge. He had led his ragged army to final victory over British professionals and mercenaries at Yorktown. And, with independence secure -- he had gone home to his beloved Mount Vernon for a long-postponed, richly deserved retirement as a Virginia squire.

But from this contented retreat, Washington saw something which troubled him. He saw the fruits of the Revolution withering away under the dissension and disunion of that loosely formed government under the Articles of Confederation. He recognized that the very vitality, the diversity and individuality which provided America its greatest potential strength -- were, without unity, becoming its greatest weakness under the rivalries of the Confederation. And so he left the ease of Mount Vernon, and, as he said in his inaugural address, responded to the summons of his country; "Whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love."

Washington took up the arduous duties of presiding over the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in that memorable summer of 1787. And he gave his indispensable support to the Constitution hammered out during those hot summer days. Without his support, the new Constitution would scarcely have won approval. And it was the adoption of the Constitution which truly transformed 13 separate, sometimes squabbling states into a single nation, united in purpose and destined to greatness.

(MORE)

What Washington and our other Founding Fathers achieved nearly two centuries ago, is what still gives America its strength and vitality, the Federal idea of encouraging diversity within a framework of unity. And it is this acceptance of numerous centers of initiative, of fresh thinking and of responsibility, spread among thousands of communities in the now 50 state governments, all unified under the stars and stripes, that is the foundation of our freedom and strength today.

When we look back on the mountainous challenges which Washington and our other Founding Fathers faced, when we look at what this Nation subsequently survived and achieved, how can we doubt? How can we recall our history without knowing that we are the luckiest people on Earth, because we built the greatest nation on Earth and because we have preserved our freedom? And how can we remember what our ancestors went through, without facing the problems of today with the same faith, confidence, determination, and recognition that we are the same kind of people, that we have the same tough genes in our national character.

And recognizing that fact -- we ought to recognize also that there is no problem that we cannot overcome. There is nothing wrong with America that Americans cannot right.

As Washington said in that first inaugural address which we are marking here today, ours was a noble "experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." And, beyond question, the United States of America has been the most successful experiment in human history. Our sacred duty is to keep it so.

#