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MAY 8, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY
(Lincoln, Nebraska)

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

10:55 A.M. CDT

Thank you very, very much, Chancellor Breckenridge, Dr. Varner, Senator Hruska, Senator Curtis, graduates, families, and guests:

President Varner, it was my great privilege this morning to be initiated as an Honorary Member of the Senior Honorary Society of Innocents, that is a unique occasion, an honor, for a President of the United States. (Laughter)

But as I walked in here, I was just greatly impressed by this fantastic sports center. Bob Devaney is not only a great football coach and Terry Carpenter is not only a great legislator, but both of them aren't bad architects either. (Laughter)

I was born not far from here in Omaha, and although I moved away at a very early age, I have always had a great affection and a tremendous respect for Nebraska and for the people of the Great Plains.

Some years before many of you graduating here were born, I can remember very vividly the welcome given by Great Britain to Dwight Eisenhower who was raised, of course, in your next door neighbor, the State of Kansas. It was just after the Second World War and he was a hero on both sides of the Atlantic. There in Guildhall, before an assembly of leading dignitaries, Ike told the audience in very simple but very moving eloquence, "I come from the heart of America." It was always one of Ike's proudest claims. It has always been one of my proudest claims, and in the years before all of you, I hope it will become one of your proudest testaments as well.

Before coming here today, I thought back for a few moments on how much the graduating students of the Class of 1976 have seen and witnessed during the four years that you have been in college. Certainly those four years have been among the most traumatic and the most trying in the history of the United States.

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Since you came here as freshmen, one of our longest and most divisive wars has wound to a very tragic conclusion. We have experienced the worst recession since the dust bowl days of the 1930's. We have suffered the worst inflation in our peacetime history. And a scandal in high office cast a shadow over the Presidency itself.

Nor did any of these tragic events occur in a vacuum. They followed directly from a decade that was filled with even greater social unrest and social tension. Violence, campus riots, civil disturbances, mounting distrust, all of these were an unhappy legacy of the 1960's.

By the time that you came to college, some of our most influential citizens throughout the length and breadth of our country seemed to be losing faith in America.

In *The Greening of America*, a book that swept many, many college campuses early in the 1970's, author Charles Reich asserted that "For most Americans work is mindless, exhausting, boring, servile and hateful. Our life activities have become plastic, vicarious, false to our genuine needs."

"The Nation," concluded a well-known historian, "is essentially evil and the evil can be exorcized only by turning the system upside down."

A leading newspaper columnist said it more pointedly. "American life doesn't work any more."

Fortunately, the great majority of our people never gave up, never lost faith in themselves or in this great country.

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In the four years that you have been here at the university, the nation has not only persevered, but more importantly it has prevailed. As you leave today to enter the mainstream of the working world or perhaps to continue your studies, I would suggest to you that the United States is far, far different, as we see it this morning, from the world that you knew when you came here as a freshman.

The changes are perhaps more evident in areas such as our economy. For millions upon millions of our citizens, the fears of inflation and unemployment so strong just a year ago are now receding. No one believes that we have fully cured our economic ailments, but the patient is mending rapidly and there is every reason to be more confident for the future.

Progress can be found in many other areas. We are at peace. Our friendships in Europe and in the Pacific are showing renewed vitality. As you leave this university, you become a part of the first generation in more than 30 years that can graduate with a choice rather than a mandate to be drafted into the Armed Services and, too, our farm exports to the rest of the world are at record levels.

We are forging a new, more creative relationship with the developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere. Because we are strong, because we are prepared, because our will is undiminished and our purpose is clear, America has gained a new respect. The free world once more looks to us for leadership and for inspiration. All of these changes are surface examples of a broader phenomenon that is occurring in our society.

I sense that the nation is finally turning away from an incessant preoccupation with its troubles, turning away from the inward looking pessimism to a great new spirit of optimism. A new buoyancy is emerging in America. For the first time in a long while, there is a growing faith in the future in America. We see it in the way that consumers are now committing more of their financial resources to new homes, new cars and other major purchases.

We see it in what businesses are doing, once again beginning to invest in new plants and new jobs. Not only are Americans investing in the future, but foreigners are, too, as they decide to build new businesses, shopping centers, and other large enterprises in our nation.

We also see the growing confidence out across the great breadbasket of the country where farmers are expanding their crops and their production. We see it on campuses, where students have put down their bricks and taken up their books, and we see it especially in churches and in families where there is a deep yearning for spiritual fulfillment.

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We have not yet overcome many of our most persistent problems. No one should pretend that we have. We are still far below our potential as a people. Unemployment, poverty, crime and prejudice are too far widespread, but we have moved beyond a time that could be characterized as the greening of America.

What we see today is the healing of America. I would urge upon you young men and you young women entering a world of swift, blinding change -- you learn and understand what has happened in these last few years. One day, when one or all of you are directing the affairs of State or of a nation, it may be very helpful to look backward to the 1970s and ask how America pulled itself up by its bootstraps.

One answer I suggest is that even in its darkest hours the United States stayed economically, materially and morally strong. Even when the nation was afflicted with high inflation and high unemployment, we still had the most dynamic, most productive economic system in the entire world.

With less than 6 percent of world population, we continued to produce over a third of the world's goods and services. Our standard of living by any standard is unmatched. Our farmers continue to be the wonder of mankind. A single farmer today produces enough food to feed 50 people, both here as well as abroad. Let us never forget the great reservoir of spiritual and moral strength that we have in this country, the American character that has never known the meaning of the word "retreat."

After the first World War, President Woodrow Wilson was asked why American soldiers had been so successful on the battlefields of Europe. "I will tell you," he said, "that war was won by the American spirit." You know what one of our American wits said, that it only took half as long to train an American Army as any other because you had to train them to go only one way.

There is a second lesson to be learned from these last years as well. It struck me with a very special force since I became your President. The fact is that every President of the United States in modern times is besieged with requests and pleas to intervene and to solve almost every problem confronting our citizenry.

As soon as serious difficulties arise, a cry seems to go up that the Federal Government should rush to the rescue with more programs, more spending, more regulation, anything so long as the pain is eased and the problems postponed to another day. I have been raised in a different school, a school that has its home out here in the Great Plains.

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It is a school that says that the American people are better equipped to solve many of their own problems than is the Government in Washington, D.C. It is a school that says Government has already grown to an ominous size and already interferes far too much in the lives of its citizens. It is a school that says when people gain the belief that Government has every answer, they lose that necessary belief in themselves.

There in Washington, as inflation and unemployment mounted in late 1974 and early 1975, there were rising pressures for the President and the Congress to intervene with new massive programs. "Start spending more money," we were urged by many. "Let's have a higher and higher budget, higher and higher deficits, more and more debt," and then if that only produces more inflation, we can put the economy in a new straitjacket of wage and price controls.

But, we weren't prepared to go down that road again. We had seen its results too many times before. This time, with the stalwart help of your Congressional delegation, we resisted that temptation to let the Government solve our economic problems. Instead, we entrusted the primary responsibility to the people themselves and to the great free enterprise system that is the mainspring of our society.

Today the results are self-evident. The American recovery is moving along rapidly and with greater vitality than any other economy throughout the world. While the economic threats have certainly not disappeared, we now have concrete evidence that if Washington will only make the right decisions, if Washington will only trust the people, then America can stay on the path toward prosperity.

There is one final lesson to be drawn from these years that I hope each and every one of you will always remember.

Many, many times in the 1960s and in the early 1970s, as skies grew dark and cloudy, there was a temptation to give up, to yield to the voices of defeat or the voices of hysteria, but the American people never did. They never gave up.

Here in Nebraska people have always known full well what it is to endure and to overcome adversity. As students here at the University, you must have read about the hardships of the 19th century, prairie life in the novels of one of Nebraska's and one of America's most beloved writers, Willa Cather. You must have talked with your parents as well as your grandparents about the great farm depression and the droughts of the 1930s. You know that life on the Great Plains can be tough and that one thing you can never afford to do is quit.

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By instinct, Americans move in only one direction, forward. The story is sometimes told how Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. Time and time again he tried to find the right amount but could not unlock the secrets of science. Finally, his young assistant said, "Mr. Edison, perhaps you should give up. You have tried your experiments 586 times and every time you have failed."

"No," replied Edison. "We have only found 586 ways that won't work and won't have to be tried again. Soon we will find one that does." He did. Edison was never a quitter. To many, as he once said, "Genious is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."

Members of the graduating Class of 1976, I join your parents and your friends this morning in saluting you for your accomplishments. By your studies here, you have earned one of the most cherished documents that anyone can possess, a college degree. You have successfully begun your careers during one of the most exciting and potentially one of the most rewarding periods in all of America's history.

In the years ahead, when new challenges arise, as they surely will, I urge that you bear in mind the lessons of the past. Remember that America is a great and a good Nation with an enormous reservoir of material and personal resources. Remember that the secret of America lies not in the power of its Government, but in the power, the freedom and the goodness of its people.

And remember, too, that America is always at the height of its glory when she has to climb the tallest mountains.

A few years ago we celebrated the 150th Anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The biographer and poet, Carl Sandburg, went to the fields of Gettysburg to reflect for a few moments about the Nation that he loved. He spoke about the history of America and the spirit of America. The will and vision that motivated people in Plymouth seeking freedom of conscience, this moved on and was written on the faces at Valley Forge.

It was on the faces of men who marched from home to the campaign that brought them to Gettysburg. "Long before this time of ours," he said, "America saw the faces of men and women torn and shaken in turmoil and chaos and storm. Always the path of American destiny has been to the unknown. And always there arose enough reserves of strength, balances of sanity, portions of wisdom, to carry the Nation through to a fresh start with an ever-renewing vitality."

Today you begin your own journey into the unknown. You carry with you our best wishes and fondest hopes. You carry the wisdom of one of our finest universities and you carry, too, a greater heritage of Nebraska, of the Plains and of America.

Congratulations and thank you very, very much.