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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 DEDICATION CEREMONIES  
 OF THE AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

This beautiful new museum and its exciting exhibits of the mastery of air and space is a perfect birthday present from the American people to themselves. Although it is impolite to boast, perhaps we can say with patriotic pride that the flying machines we see here, from the Wright Brothers 12-horsepower biplane to the latest space vehicle, were mostly "Made in U. S. A."

The story of powered flight is an American saga. The wonder is that it has all happened within the lifetime and memory of living Americans. How many of us remember vividly the thrill of our first takeoff? How many recall the first news of Lindbergh's safe landing in Paris? How many saw man's first giant step that planted the American flag on the moon?

At this moment an unmanned Viking spacecraft is circling the planet Mars. It has only been eighty years since the Smithsonian's Samuel Langley launched his unmanned "aerodrome" for a half-mile flight before it plunged into the Potomac.

The amazing American achievements in air and space tell us something even more important about ourselves on earth. The hallmark of the American adventure has been a willingness -- even an eagerness -- to reach for the unknown.

For three and a half centuries Americans and their ancestors have been explorers and inventors, pilgrims and pioneers -- always searching for something new -- across the oceans, across the continent, across the solar system, across the frontiers of science, beyond the boundaries of the human mind.

Confined within these walls and windows are the products of American men and women whose imagination and determination could not be confined. There is nothing more American than saying: If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again. Nor could Americans be confined to the Atlantic seaboard. "The wide open spaces" have lured Americans from our beginnings. The frontier shaped and molded our society and our people.

Gertrude Stein once wrote: "In the United States there is more space where nobody is, than where anybody is. This is what makes America what it is." Indeed, the impact of the unknown, of what was dimly perceived to be "out there", has left a permanent mark on the American character.

Starting in 1607, a few fragile vessels like the Discovery and the Mayflower set sail across 3,000 miles of unfriendly sea. Their passengers and crews know far less about their destinations than American astronauts knew at lift-off about the lunar landscape a quarter-million miles away. The pilgrims feared the perils of the voyage, and the miseries of the unfamiliar land. But the sentiments that sustained them were recorded by Governor William Bradford: "...that all great and honourable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and must be both enterprised and overcome with answerable courages..." Behind them lay the mighty ocean, separating them from the world they knew -- and before them lay an untamed wilderness.

Three and a half centuries later, that wilderness has been transformed. A continent once remote and isolated now supports a mighty nation -- a nation built by those who also dared to reach for the unknown.

The discovery of this continent was unprecedented. It opened the eyes of mankind, showing them the world was bigger than they had thought. Our nation's birth was unprecedented as well. A new form of free government was begun, which would allow for change by future generations, yet secure basic rights to men and women. The chance to earn property was given to those who had never had property -- education to those who had never been educated. In the New World, Americans had to be handy. Ours was a do-it-yourself society, and our fascination with machines -- lighten labor and to increase production -- began very early. The practical problems of engineering and science required education, and the hard life attracted few learned scholars from Europe. Sometimes Americans built their schools before their own rough cabins.

By the time of the Revolution there were more colleges and universities in America than in the British Isles. The men who wrote our Declaration of Independence were probably the best-educated rebels and revolutionaries history had ever seen. And when independence was won, the growth of free public education in the United States amazed the world and quickened our pace in science and technology. Our Constitution specifically gave Congress power to promote science and useful arts by rewarding inventors and authors with patents and copyrights. While some governments are always fearful of what individuals may write or discover, ours has always encouraged free inquiry, with results that speak for themselves. It was just a century ago, at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, that Alexander Graham Bell first publicly demonstrated his telephone. Today millions around the world can hear -- and see -- the highlights of history as they are happening. Each new discovery, the result of each experiment, humbles us, by showing the dimensions of the unknown. Our progress can be measured not only by the extent of our knowledge -- but by increasing awareness of all that remains to be discovered.

To keep reaching into the unknown, we must remain free. We must have freedom to find and freedom to fail. Like our ancestors, we are always at the edge of the unknown. In the next 100 years, the American spirit of adventure can:

-- find out even more about the forces of nature -- how to harness them and preserve them;

-- explore the great riches of the oceans, still an uncharted frontier;

-- turn space itself into a partner for controlling pollution and instant communication to every corner of the world;

-- learn how to make our energy resources renewable and draw new energy from sun and earth;

-- develop new agricultural technologies so all the deserts of the earth can bloom;

-- conquer many more of humanity's deadly enemies such as cancer and heart disease.

As Thoreau reminded us, long before the age of air and space, "The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever man fronts a fact." The American adventure is driven forward by challenge, competition and creativity. It demands of us sweat and sacrifice and gives us substance and satisfaction.

Our country must never cease to be a place where men and women try the untried, test the impossible and take uncertain paths into the unknown.

Our Bicentennial marks the beginning of such a quest, a daring attempt to build a new order in which free people govern themselves and fulfill their individual destinies. But the best of the American adventure lies ahead.

Thomas Jefferson said: "I like to dream of the future better than the history of the past." So did his friendly rival, John Adams, who wrote of his dream:

"...to see rising in America an empire of liberty, and a prospect of two or three hundred millions of freemen, without one noble or one king among them. You say it is impossible. If I should agree with you in this, I would still say -- let us try the experiment."

I can only add: Let the experiment continue.

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