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THE WHITE HOUSE
REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT
VALLEY FORGE STATE PARK

9:12 A.M. EDT

Governor Shapp, Senator Scott, Senator Schweiker, Governor Ray, Congressman Schulze, Lieutenant Governor Klein, Secretary Kleppe, Administrator Warner, Reverend Clergy, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Governor Shapp, I am deeply grateful for your very kind and generous remarks. The sun always shines in Pennsylvania. (Laughter)

They came here in the snows of winter over a trail marked with the blood of the rag-bound feet. The iron forge that gave this place its name had been destroyed by the British when General Washington and his ragged Continental Army encamped here -- exhausted, outnumbered and short of everything except faith.

We gather here today, the 200th anniversary of our independence, to commemorate their sacrifices even before we celebrate the glorious Declaration. Americans will remember the name of Valley Forge as long as the spirit of sacrifice lives within their hearts.

Here the vein of iron in our national character was forged. In the 18th century the Colonial American was far more free and far more prosperous than his European cousins. Englishmen regarded us with some envy as appropriate subjects to share their grinding tax burden.

After Concord Bridge and Breed's Hill, the British Generals were impressed with our marksmanship and fighting spirit, but they still dismissed Washington's militiamen as a rabble of arms.

Many years later, when he was 91, a veteran of Concord was interviewed and asked why he took up his rifle against his King. Did he feel intolerably oppressed? "No, never paid a penny for one of them stamps, never drank any tea, never heard of Locke. Only read the Bible and the Almanac."

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Well, then, what did all the fighting mean? "Young man," the aging Revolutionary said very firmly, "What we meant in going for those Redcoats was this -- we had always governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean that we should."

Without Jefferson's eloquence, those are the words of the American people's Declaration of Independence. That was the straight talk that brought some 11,000 ordinary Americans -- farmers, workers, tradesmen and shopkeepers -- into this valley of sacrifice in the bitter winter of 1777. Uncounted hundreds were never to leave.

They did not die amid the banners and the tearful sound of battle. They weakened slowly and quietly succumbed to cold, sickness and starvation. Yet, their courage and suffering--those who survived as well those who fell--were no less meaningful than the sacrifices of those who manned the battlements of Boston and scaled the parapets of Yorktown.

In the battle against despair, Washington and his men kept freedom's lonely vigil. The leadership and the led drew strength and hope from one another. Around the winter campfires that dotted those fields, the flame of liberty was somehow kept burning.

Something happened at Valley Forge. That ragged, starving Army here emerged in a way that can be sensed but never fully described. They suffered, they trained, they toughened, they buried their dead and they stayed. They stuck it out.

When spring melted the snows and green returned to this beautiful countryside, a proud and disciplined fighting force marched out of this valley to victory and to the pages of history, unaware of the greatness they had done and oblivious of our gratitude.

As Abraham Lincoln noted long afterwards at another sacred site in Pennsylvania, nothing we can say here today can further consecrate or hallow this ground. But, we can rededicate ourselves to the spirit of sacrifice shown at Valley Forge, Gettysburg, the Argonne Forest, Anzio Beach and Iwo Jima.

Not all sacrifices are made in war. There are always sacrifices of peace. The sturdy wagon trains that have returned here, the wonderful people who drove them and those along the way who rededicate themselves to the great principles of the Declaration of Independence, offer heartwarming proof that our American adventure has just begun.

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Our Bicentennial is the happy birthday of all 50 States, the commonwealth and self-governing territories. It is not just a celebration for the original 13 colonies. Americans are one people, and we can still hear them saying "We have always governed ourselves, and we always mean to."

The earliest English settlers carried the Bible and Blackstone's Commentary across the Atlantic among their few cherished possessions and established their own self-government on a strange and hostile coast. American families in prairie schooners like these took with them on the overland trails the principles of equality and their God-given rights of the Declaration of Independence.

Their restless search for a better life was begun in the spirit of adventure, but it was the spirit of sacrifice that sustained them. They suffered cruel winters, savage attacks, blazing deserts and bloody feet.

Many were buried beside the trail, but many stuck it out, dug in and built permanent settlements where women stood the same sentry duty as the men.

In the West, the Declaration's promise of legal and political equality for women was first broadened. The American pioneers knew that in their wilderness homes they could not be colonials ruled by a distant Government. They had assurance that in due course they could govern themselves as full citizens of equal States.

Their children and future generations would have all the rights of Washington, Jackson and Lincoln. So do we, and more so.

As we continue our American adventure, the patriots of Valley Forge and the pioneers of the American frontier -- indeed, all our heroes and heroines of war and peace -- send us this single, urgent message -- though prosperity is a good thing, though compassionate charity is a good thing, though institutional reform is a good thing, a nation survives only so long as the spirit of sacrifice and self-discipline is strong within its people.

Independence has to be defended as well as declared. Freedom is always worth fighting for, and liberty ultimately belongs to those willing to suffer for it.

If we remember this, we can bring health where there is disease, peace where there is strife, progress where there is poverty and want, and when our Tricentennial celebration rolls around 100 years from now, grateful Americans will come to this shrine of quiet valor, this forge of our Republic iron core.

Thank you very much.