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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE ANNUAL CONVENTION
OF THE NATIONAL EXCHANGE CLUBS
SHERATON PARK HOTEL

Tonight I want to share with you briefly my personal feelings about two days that will always stay fresh in my memory. Last Sunday and Monday--our great two hundredth birthday party--were two of the most stirring and memorable days of my life.

I saw celebrations in five historic places in those two days--Valley Forge, Philadelphia, Washington, New York and Monticello. What I saw was no more than a small part of our national festivities. But I could feel a spirit of renewal take hold across our country. It is for that spirit that America's 200th Fourth of July will be remembered.

There had been some fears this Independence Day would fizzle--or explode. Some thought it would be nothing more than an occasion for hollow self-congratulation. Others thought it would be cheapened by commercialism--a Bicentennial bought and sold. Still others, remembering a past decade of discord, feared the day would demonstrate national divisiveness, rather than national unity. Those fears proved groundless. I had a feeling they would, from my own experience last year at the very first Bicentennial event.

When I watched the faces of the people who lined the road from Lexington to Concord, I could see our great celebration would be a success--and it was. Americans enjoyed their national birthday party. And more than that--it renewed our sense of purpose.

A great tide of rejoicing washed across the land, removing many remnants of past bitterness. Millions of Americans felt their hearts swell with a sense of pride some thought they had forgotten.

That feeling was summed up in the words of one American interviewed as he watched the fireworks at the Washington Monument on Sunday night. "It gave me a feeling of... How great this country is," he said, "How beautiful the people are."

Americans realized once again that America is an exciting idea. From the Fourth of July weekend I felt a new optimism emerging, a new era of good feeling in America.

The pageantry and the fireworks did not create those feelings, nor did the historic anniversary. They merely provided the spark for a spirit that was always there, waiting to be rekindled in the American people. It blazed across the country on July the Fourth.

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That day has gone, but the spirit remains. Now, while it still burns brightly, we must provide new focal points for our new optimism -- new ways of exercising our renewed pride in America. There is so much still to be achieved. In our third century we must continue to increase the freedom and opportunity available to all Americans. We must conquer disease, and unlock the secrets of the earth and the universe. And we must make our people secure -- in their jobs, on their streets, and in a peaceful world.

Local activities and service programs are one way to focus our national energy on these challenges. The National Exchange Clubs have fostered such activities for over 65 years. Your projects are of national importance -- but they are selected and carried out by local people, sensitive to the special needs of their communities.

Neighborhoods and churches, schools and civic groups can keep America as proud and active every day as it was on the Fourth of July. You can help maintain America's renewed confidence in itself. Your projects will bring Americans together, and keep us whole. You can give historic meaning to your motto, by making this time of national rebirth an era of "unity for service."

America's government, too, should be a focal point for national pride. It must nurture all the energy and spirit we saw on July Fourth, for the good of all the American people.

But to do so, the great instrument of our government must be used wisely and cautiously. It can only be an instrument of pride if every government official, elected or appointed, is willing and able to be a model of personal integrity. Each must set himself or herself the standard of a George Washington, a Thomas Jefferson or an Abraham Lincoln.

We are not all going to attain the greatness of such historic figures -- but we can all be guided by their wisdom and their ideals. We can all aspire to achieve the goal set by George Washington at the Constitutional Convention, when he said: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair; the rest is in the hands of God."

In this way we will sustain not just the spirit of a single historic weekend -- but the spirit of two centuries.

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