

Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED UPON THE COMMISSIONING
OF THE USS NIMITZ

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

As each of us looks upon this great ship, a single thought must seize our minds: Only the United States of America can make a machine like this. There is nothing like her in this world.

We have witnessed here the magic moment when an intricate mass of steel and cable and sophisticated marvels of engineering suddenly becomes a living thing with a unique personality. No matter how many commissionings you take part in, breaking the pennant and setting the first watch involves a special reward for all of us who love the sea and the United States Navy.

I thank you, Captain Compton, and all the ship's company for the privilege of being here. The Nimitz is now a United States ship. I congratulate all who helped build her and all who man her, as well as all their loved ones who, as you know better than I, will do a lot of waiting for the sake of our country and of freedom everywhere. Their allegiance and their service to country is also in the very best traditions of this Nation.

We all regret that Mrs. Chester W. Nimitz, Senior, cannot share this proud hour with us, but I am happy that other members of the Admiral's family are here. It is also gratifying to have Admiral Rickover here for without these two farsighted submariners, Fleet Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Rickover, we would have no nuclear Navy. Few of us remember that it was Admiral Nimitz, as he was completing his career as Chief of Naval Operations in 1947, who recommended to the Secretary of the Navy that the Bureau of Ships and the new Atomic Energy Commission get together to design and build a nuclear propulsion plant for a submarine -- and Admiral Rickover took it from there.

I see this great ship as a double symbol for today's challenges. She is first of all a symbol of the United States, of our immense resources in materials and skilled manpower, of our inexhaustible energy, of the inventive and productive genius of our free competitive economic system, and of our massive but controlled military strength.

Wherever the United States ship Nimitz shows her flag, she will be seen as we see her now, a solid symbol of U.S. strength and resolve -- made in America and manned by Americans. She is a moveable part and parcel of our country, a self-contained city at sea, plying the international waters of the world in defense of our national interests. Whether her mission is one of defense, diplomacy or humanity, the Nimitz will command awe and admiration from some; caution and circumspection from others, and respect from all.

There is no need for me to dwell on the importance of aircraft carriers in today's and tomorrow's defense planning -- though as an old carrier man myself I might enjoy it. During recent days, we have seen the most convincing demonstration of their readiness and flexibility in the successful execution of national policy. Without the five aircraft carriers which served as the nucleus of our forces operating off South Vietnam, without the skill and heroic performance of Marine Corps and Naval aviation and support personnel, without the Air Force helicopter crews who operated from the carrier decks, we could not have rescued all the remaining American citizens and thousands of endangered Vietnamese from Saigon within twenty hours.

(CORE)

The Nimitz joins the Fleet at an auspicious moment, when our determination to strengthen our ties with allies across both great oceans and to work for peace and stability around the world requires clear demonstration. Along with our other forces worldwide, the Nimitz will make critically important contributions in our continuing quest for a peaceful planet -- a planet whose surface is more than seventy percent ocean.

As I see the United States Ship Nimitz as a symbol of the vast power, productive skill and economic strength of America, so will others around the world. To all, this great ship is visible evidence of our commitment to friends and allies and our capability to maintain those commitments. But for Americans, especially, she is also a symbol of the man whose name she bears.

The grandson of a seafaring German immigrant who grew up deep in Texas -- and never lost his pride in his native state -- Chester W. Nimitz started from the smoke of Pearl Harbor and carried the fight to the enemy. His superb leadership and the valor of more than two million American fighting men culminated on the deck of the U S S Missouri four years later as he signed the Japanese surrender as commander in chief of the largest naval armada ever assembled.

Looking back on my own life, one of the things of which I am proudest is that I can say "I served under Admiral Nimitz in the Pacific."

As a lowly lieutenant on the USS Monterey, a carrier you could probably stow in the hangar deck of the Nimitz, I saw very little of Fleet Admirals during World War II. But every watch officer could recognize the crisp CINCPAC dispatches that Admiral Nimitz obviously had written in his own hand.

One biographer who did know him, Professor E. B. Potter of the Naval Academy, summed up Admiral Nimitz' qualities in simple words that well serve as a model for anyone who aspires to leadership in any line of endeavor:

"He surrounded himself with the ablest men he could find and sought their advice, but he made his own decisions. He was a keen strategist who never forgot that he was dealing with human beings, on both sides of the conflict. He was aggressive in war without hate, audacious while never failing to weigh the risks."

Admiral Nimitz, of all the great American commanders of World War II, was one of the most self-effacing -- and certainly one of the most effective. He possessed great stamina, an abundance of common sense, and such immense inner strength that he felt no need to strut or shout. Born near what today we would call the poverty level, he worked hard, studied hard, and was a long time getting ahead. He spent his whole life training to serve his country in commanding men at sea -- and when needed he was prepared. He learned by his mistakes and was tolerant of others -- but always in command.

Those who had the good fortune to know Admiral Nimitz well say his fundamental honesty -- intellectual honesty and integrity -- enabled him to keep a steady course toward his ultimate objective without yielding to the tremendous pressures of his responsibilities. He did the job he was prepared to do, did it superbly, hung up his sword and filled his final years with quiet service to his country and the cause of peace.

Repeatedly urged to write his wartime memoirs, Admiral Nimitz just as repeatedly refused. To do so, he explained, would compel him either to hurt the reputations of some fine shipmates or to tell some whopping lies.

His own philosophy, in his own words, has long been an inspiration to me. Typically, he credited it to his seafaring grandfather.

"The sea, like life itself, is a stern taskmaster," he recalled. "The best way to get along with either is to learn all you can, then do your best, and don't worry -- especially about things over which you have no control."

So this great ship is a symbol of a great sea commander and a great American -- one whose common virtues, magnified by the stern demands of duty -- turned defeat into victory and made the broad Pacific again worthy of its name.

It is my determination to keep it that way, the way all the oceans and continents ought to be. But Fleet Admiral Nimitz and this fine ship both tell us that controlled strength is the sure guarantor of peace.

Let us all -- and particularly those who serve in the United States ship Nimitz now and hereafter -- rededicate ourselves to this principle, and to unstinting service to our country and its people.

Good afternoon and Godspeed.

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