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Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
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Contact: Dale A. Petroskey
Tele.: (202) 366-4570

REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY
SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION ELIZABETH HANFORD DOLE
ANNANDALE HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT
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What an honor it is to speak on this important occasion in the lives of today's Annandale graduates and their families. I feel a great kinship with the graduating class at this hour. For I too have sat in cap and gown, hoping my commencement speaker would remember what Franklin Roosevelt once said about public speakers: "Be brief, be sincere, be seated."

I will try to live up to President Roosevelt's advice, because I know some of you want to get an early start to Ocean City to celebrate.

I've been looking forward to this since I first received your invitation. You see, I have heard so many good things about Annandale High School -- particularly from a proud father of one of the graduates. I hope that Christa Dominguez won't mind my telling you that her father, Larry, is a highly valued member of my staff. And Larry, is one of Annandale High's biggest boosters. In fact, he's told me a great deal about the Atoms.

And I've heard a great deal about Annandale from many other people, as well. Your reputation precedes you. Your sense of tradition and the sense of community that you enjoy are traits rooted in the American character.

You, the graduates begin today a major new phase of life's journey. And I can't imagine a better starting off point than historic Constitution Hall. For this beautiful building, with its perfect acoustics and handsome decor, is a memorial to that immortal document -- the Constitution of the United States. Erected by the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution -- Constitution Hall is itself an important part of our history and Annandale High School's history. Indeed, 22 of Annandale's classes have held their commencement exercises here.

And it was 200 years ago that the foundation for the journey you are about to begin was laid down in Philadelphia. Fifty-five men gathered in what was then known as the Pennsylvania State House to consider alternatives to the existing Articles of Confederation. History tells us that what we know as the Constitutional Convention didn't get underway on time. In fact, it started two weeks late -- because the roads to Philadelphia were so bad! It took George Washington four days to travel by carriage from Mt. Vernon to Philadelphia. Today, that same trip on the Metroliner takes one hour and thirty seven minutes. Of course, if the convention were held today, there'd not only be men representing the colonies, but also women!

Two hundred years later, we pause to remember the men of Philadelphia. Yet it isn't their daily debates that we recall, nor even the individual signers, most of whom are lost in the pages of time. No, it's the idea behind the document -- the idea that America was different because here, we the people would rule ourselves.

The newspaper, USA Today, surveyed high school students recently to ask how they felt about the Constitution. Although they were from different schools in different states, students spoke with one voice. Again and again, they mentioned the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

"I can be Jewish, Christian or Moslem," says Jeremy Katz of Cherry Creek High School, Englewood, Colorado, "I can watch the Cosby Show or MTV. But most of all, the Constitution means that I am free."

And that freedom is shared by high school students of all races, creeds and sex. Carlos Mendieta of North Miami Beach High School says the Constitution means "freedom, equality and most of all liberty -- the liberty to chase down my dreams and be the best at what I do."

"I can have all of this without having the fear of being discriminated against," Carlos adds.

And Jennifer Webb of Vineland, New Jersey, High School, calls it "the main ingredient in our recipe of American democracy."

The document whose bicentennial we observe this year was tailored to fit the changing needs of a dynamic and fluid society. It was a coat woven to fit an infant republic of three million souls, and which now clothes the 240 million Americans in opportunity and freedom. The framers wrote for the ages. They embraced timeless beliefs in self-government and shared responsibility. For they believed in the ability of seemingly ordinary people -- people like you and me -- to accomplish extraordinary things... to make their own decisions...to realize their own destinies.

The drafters of the Constitution drew up a challenge as well as a charter. They fashioned a popular government, knowing that the only way it could survive, was to enlist the energies and devotion of the people themselves.

They crafted a government strong enough to protect our liberties -- but limited enough to keep from crushing them in its embrace. Thomas Jefferson said it well: "That government is best, which governs least, because its people discipline themselves."

Recently, I happened to come across a speech on citizenship and democracy which I gave in 1978, when I was a member of the Federal Trade Commission. In that speech, I indicated my concern that many citizens seemed to have lost the sense of pride and commitment to the ideal of America that once prevailed among our people. I spoke of a decline in national confidence, and the rise of public apathy in its place. Sadly, many Americans no longer felt that as individuals they could make a difference. And if they stopped believing in themselves, I wondered, then how could they believe in the American dream of individual effort and national service? As our citizens turned inward, we were in danger of turning out the lights in America. Little wonder that writer Thomas Wolfe dubbed the 1970's the "Me Decade."

Happily, I stand before you nine years later to report what you already know -- all that has changed. The "Me Decade" has been replaced by the "We Decade," as citizens all across America have regained confidence in themselves and in the mission of their country to serve as a beacon of hope to an oppressed planet.

Today, we are witnessing nothing less than an American renaissance, a grassroots revival of those fundamental principles that give character to our land and reality to our dreams. We are renewing the ancient ideals of hard work, pride of family, love of freedom, and trust in God. We have rediscovered our roots -- and we are reaching for the stars.

Back in 1981 -- there was good reason to wonder where America's economy was going. Interest rates had hit a high of 21 percent, the highest since the Civil War. Inflation was in the double digits, and this same inflation was pushing Americans into higher and higher tax brackets. And America was suffering from the lowest annual rate of growth in productivity of any major industrial nation.

Few doubt the strength of the American economy today. For 54 consecutive months we have enjoyed the benefits of economic growth. During that time, productivity has risen. Inflation had declined to the lowest levels since the early 1960's. Unemployment is at a seven-year low, and over 13 million new jobs have been created.

But that doesn't mean that America can afford to be complacent. We must reduce the obstacles to continued economic growth. One of our ongoing efforts must be to reduce the annual federal deficit and our nation's debt. That's particularly true because America competes in a global economy.

Indeed, in today's world economy, global competition is the key to economic survival. The U.S. must continue to free business from unnecessary red tape if we are to remain a world economic power.

We are called on to meet the challenge of defending freedom in a dangerous, sometimes desperate era. We have made significant headway in rebuilding our defenses and making America more secure. But now is no time to rest on our laurels, or let down our guard. Skimping on defense now could undo all we have achieved. It could undermine not only our own security, but that of our closest friends.

There is nothing new to the cries for less defense and more domestic spending. During one debate in the Constitutional Convention, a delegate rose to his feet and moved that "the standing army be restricted to 5,000 at any time." This prompted George Washington, as presiding officer, to suggest an amendment of his own -- to prohibit any foreign enemy from invading the American soil with more than 3,000 troops!

But what are we defending? We defend more than factories -- more than shopping malls -- more than territory. We defend the values that have blessed this land and set it apart in the family of nations. The record of the Constitutional Convention leaves no doubt that our nation's founders were sustained by their faith in God. As George Washington once said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

This evening, I am looking at America's first and ultimate line of defense. For surely we share the belief that the source of all our national strength lies in that inner strength that forms our attitudes, shapes our ambitions, and turns our aspirations into achievements.

Now the Constitution does not merely grant rights to the people, it reminds us of our responsibilities to each other and to America, and each of us, in our own way, is called to service. Benjamin Franklin, who could have written America's first manual on public service, once said, "The most important task we are undertaking as a nation is to solve the magnificent challenge of being a free people." Two centuries later, his words have not lost their resonance. They still shine forth from the red brick state house of colonial Philadelphia to guide our steps along the narrow path of duty.

There's a famous story about Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who once found himself on a train, but couldn't locate his ticket.

While the conductor watched, smiling, the 88-year old Justice Holmes searched through all of his pockets without success. Of course, the conductor recognized the distinguished Justice, so he said, "Mr. Holmes, don't worry. You don't need your ticket. You will probably find it when you get off the train and I'm sure the Pennsylvania Railroad will trust you to mail it back later."

The Justice looked up at the conductor with some irritation and said, "My dear man, that is not the problem at all. The problem is not, where is my ticket. The problem is, where am I going?"

Where, indeed. That's a good question for you who are graduating to ask yourselves as you prepare for the next chapter in your lives, whether it's more schooling or a job. It's a question every American should constantly ask himself. This bicentennial year of the Constitution offers a special opportunity to ponder the meaning of that sacred document, and the challenge it poses to your own generation and to mine. For the decisions we make today can affect the lives of other people as dramatically as the Founding Fathers have affected us.

Daniel Webster was not in Philadelphia in 1787. But no one studied the handiwork of Madison, Washington and Franklin with greater care. And the result of Webster's lifelong study was a warning to those who would come after him. "We may be tossed upon an ocean where we can see no land -- nor perhaps, the sun or stars," he said. "But there is a chart and a compass for us to study, to consult, and to obey. The chart is the Constitution."

As a people who have lived with freedom under the guidance of the Constitution for two centuries, we can forget how precious and rare that freedom is. All of us have an obligation to participate actively in the system of self-government the Constitution establishes. It is an obligation we owe not only to ourselves, but to the framers of our government -- men and women who risked everything for freedom, brave men and women who have bonded this nation with their blood, their toil and their sacrifice. And to the graduating class, you are now being given the opportunity to help shape the character of your country and your times. The inheritance into which you are entering includes a land in the throes of national renewal -- an America born again, yet, as never before, in need of leaders whose character is matched by their commitment. In the words of a great American, Woodrow Wilson, "We should not only use all the brains we have, but all that we can borrow."

Today, America herself applies for a very special loan -- borrowing not only the brains assembled here today, but the character, the sensitivity and the courage that guides them. To be sure, as a nation we require all the breakthroughs of which modern thought is capable. We need inventive thinkers to guide our economy, protect our environment, secure our rights and establish our place in the world. But most of all, we need individuals -- committed men and women, for whom conscience is the North Star by which they guide their steps -- and those of the nation they love.

I invite each of you to make your own contribution, in your own special way, to the land and its people. Many of you will continue studies, some are ready to enter the market place now. I hope you will consider public service at some point in your lives. For while you may not get rich, you will enrich the lives of millions of your countrymen. Your rewards may not

be material, but rather the satisfaction of service -- making a difference -- a positive difference -- in people's lives.

In closing, let me share with you an experience that Bob and I had when we visited the Soviet Union a few years ago for the U.S.-USSR Trade Conference -- an experience I will never forget.

At our embassy in Moscow, I talked to members of two families from Siberia, who had sought asylum from the religious persecution they had encountered in their own mother country. All they wanted was to leave Russia -- to go to any country, where they could worship freely.

In attempting to reach our embassy's gates, one of the young sons was caught by Russian guards, beaten in full sight of the two families, and then dragged away. Not until three weeks later did they learn that he had been thrown on a train back to Siberia. It was nearly five years -- separated from their friends and family and living in the basement of that embassy -- before the Soviet government allowed those families to emigrate to Israel.

As we drove up to the airport to begin our long trip home and I looked at that airplane sitting on the runway with "United States of America" emblazoned on its side, I just thanked God I could come home to a country where freedom and democracy are more than just hollow spaces.

One of your peers, Trung Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American student from Falls Church, expressed a similar feeling.

"Since I came here in 1979," Trung said, "I have enjoyed a total freedom, which did not exist under the communist regime in Vietnam. I am so lucky to be here. In this land, I can develop myself without being afraid."

Every citizen has a stake in government that lives up to its noblest promises. Each one of us is obliged to pass on to our children the freedoms that Thomas Jefferson and the rest of the men of Philadelphia entrusted to us. They created something unique in the annals of history. Let us not only preserve their past -- let us make certain that the present is worthy of preservation, so that in another 200 years, our descendants can say as proudly as we do today, "I am an American."

Congratulations, and God bless each and every one of you.

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