



U.S. Department of
Transportation

News:

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Washington, D.C. 20590

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WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT
MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA
MAY 17, 1987

What an honor to join the West Virginia University family today and I'm so pleased to be invited to speak on this important occasion in the lives of today's graduates and their families. I feel a great kinship with you at this hour. For I, too, have sat in my cap and gown, hoping my commencement speaker would remember what Franklin Roosevelt once said about public speaking: Be brief, be sincere, be seated."

I will try to live up to President Roosevelt's advice since I know you all want to make one last visit to Sunnyside and the Mountainlair.

You, the graduates, begin today a major new phase of life's journey. And it was 200 years ago, this week, that the foundation for this journey 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.

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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...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 Tom 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.

President Ronald Reagan came to office sensing the thirst in Americans for a return to basic principles. He has reminded us that we can strengthen the land we love by meeting several important challenges. These challenges go to the heart of who we are and who we want to be.

We are called on to meet the challenge of defending freedom in a dangerous, sometimes desperate era. Since taking office, the President has 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 morning, 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.

To meet these several challenges is to be reminded every day of what it is that distinguishes this constitutional republic from the rest of mankind. Today, I would like to add another challenge. For each of us, in our own way, is called to service. The Constitution does not merely grant rights to the people. It reminds us of our responsibilities to each other and to America. 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."

Where, indeed. 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?"

That's a good question for you who are graduating to ask yourselves as you prepare for the next chapter in your lives. 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 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 and their toil and their sacrifice.

And graduates, 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 another 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. I especially hope you will consider the life of public service. 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.- U.S.S.R. 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.

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.

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 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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