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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AT FLAG DAY ARMY BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

10:17 A.M. EDT

Thank you very, very much, General Tarpley, Governor Busbee, Senators Sparkman, Talmadge and Nunn, distinguished Members of the House of Representatives from the States of Georgia and of Alabama, Secretary Callaway, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a very, very great honor for me to be here in Fort Benning, the Home of the Infantry, and to join with the citizens of Columbus and Phenix City, as well, to make this a real fine community celebration. You have made coming from the banks of the Potomac to the valley of the Chattahoochee a very memorable experience.

You know, one of these things I have always admired about our men in uniform is their ever present sense of humor. And what brought this to mind, as we were walking over here Major General Tarpley told me how impressed all of Fort Benning was with the way I came out of Air Force One and down those steps in Salzburg, Austria. I asked him what he meant. He said, "Well, it is the first time we ever saw anyone come out of a plane like that and not wear a parachute." (Laughter.)

I told the General I was only trying to live up to one of your motto. He said, "Which motto is that?" I said, "Airborne, all the way."

This is a great day for the United States Army, and a great day for all Americans. Today I am proud to join a grateful Nation in saluting the Army on its 200th year of service and sacrifice to our country. On this day in 1775, a year before America's independence, our Second Continental Congress created the American Army to have meaning. The deliberations and debates of Independence Hall had to be backed up by strength.

The decisions made there had to be defended at Bunker Hill and on a dozen other battlefields across this new Nation. It was a bold step from which there could be no retreat. It was a recognition of the realities of the world in which the colonists lived, and in which we live today; that there are times when principles must be defended by the force of arms.

Since that day in 1775, our soldiers have protected and preserved this Nation at home and throughout the world.

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I know there is much that I will remember about this visit, but, perhaps, the one thing that best sums up the spirit of this day is, the simple but deeply moving statue here, at Fort Benning, of an American combat infantryman. The statue, as you well know, bears the Infantry's motto -- only two short words, but it speaks volumes for the courage, for the sacrifice, that the American fighting man has always demonstrated. The motto is, "Follow me."

It is this "Follow me" spirit, this sense of courage, leadership and sacrifice, that has characterized the American Army from its beginning as a ragged band of citizen volunteers, united only in love of liberty and a deep sense of duty.

Very few people thought that this citizens' army had much of a future in 1775. After all, the colonies had no allies and only limited industrial capacity, and the adversary was the greatest global military power of the 18th Century.

Yet, there were some who sensed from the start that, for all its weaknesses and handicaps, this was no ordinary army and that the goal it served was something special, perhaps, even unique, in the annals of history.

On June 15th, 200 years ago tomorrow, the Continental Congress chose a commander for its new army, a tall quiet Virginian. In his letter to his wife, Martha, George Washington expressed his personal faith in the mission he and his fledgling army were about to undertake together, and he wrote as follows: "It is a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this service." And that destiny saw Washington and his men march from the harsh winter and privation of Valley Forge to the ultimate victory of Yorktown.

That first American Army faced many obstacles and some defeats. But it had one enduring trait -- it would not quit. The mainstays of Washington's revolutionary force was the will to be free and the willingness to pay the price of freedom. Today's Army, exemplified here, at Fort Benning, continues that great tradition, and we thank you all.

Although we still enjoy the freedom, which the Continental Army won for us, we have also learned, over the years, that freedom is never free. Each subsequent generation, in its own time and in its own way, has answered the call to serve and sacrifice to preserve our legacy of liberty.

Today's generation is no exception, and one of the most important contributions, it has made, physically and morally, a strong United States Army, an Army that is worthy of the heritage of two centuries of heroes.

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Like the men of 1775, you, who serve today, are volunteers. With your comrades in other services, you are the guardians of both our peace and our liberty. For, if we are to avoid war, we must maintain a credible and ready fighting force on hand, ready.

Today's realities have increased, rather than reduced, our need for a solid conventional fighting force and for strong and ready infantry soldiers, such as I see here today. In today's world, as the world of George Washington, weakness is a provocation to aggression.

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It took strength to win our freedom. It will take strength to keep it and to preserve the peace. The American soldier has paid the price of freedom for countless years, and countless battlefields throughout the world. For my part, I will do everything I can to see that our servicemen and women continue to receive the recognition and the respect that is their due. And I will continue and maximize my effort to work with the Congress to keep our Armed Forces supplied with the best and the most modern weapons, training and equipment, in the world today.

In the short time that I have been here at Fort Benning, I have seen and felt the pride and the vitality of the modern volunteer soldier. Last week I had the privilege to fly to West Point to give the graduation address. My old friend and former colleague in the Congress, Secretary Callaway, was along then as he is today. I asked Bo, while we were in Air Force One, how the all-volunteer force was doing.

Well, it is a good thing it was a short flight (Laughter.) because when Bo gets to talking about the success of the all-volunteer Army, he just won't quit. But I can see here today why Bo is so excited, and I share that enthusiasm.

From my days in the Congress, I can well remember the spirited debate and the concern expressed over the establishment of an all-volunteer Army. An all-volunteer Army of 782,000 soldiers was considered by many as impractical at best, and impossible at worst.

I can vividly remember one of my Congressional colleagues saying, "The only way to get good volunteers is to draft them." Well, as so often happens, the doubters were wrong. Today's Army is not only an Army of volunteers; it is most importantly an Army of winners, and we are proud of them.

It is truly representative of all of the American people. As a matter of fact, the Army is attracting better educated, better qualified; higher skilled young men and women into its ranks than ever before. And most importantly, from what I see here today and have observed elsewhere, this new Army has kept in tact that esprit de corps, which 200 years of history and tradition have instilled.

Seeing so many flags proudly flying here reminds me of the fact that besides being an important anniversary of the Army, today is also Flag Day. As I travel across America, I am proud to see that more and more people are displaying flags in their yards, on their cars, their places of business. Perhaps the spirit of the Bicentennial has caught on.

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Whatever the reason, let us never forget that the flag we honor, that we honor today, embodies 200 years of experiences of great people. It symbolizes the Nation's history. As President Woodrow Wilson said in a quote concerning the flag, "No man can rightly serve under that flag who has not caught some of the meaning of that history."

Each of us in our daily lives, in our sense of patriotism and purpose, can add to that history and the flag that embodies it. For when you get right down to it, the most remarkable thing about America is not the fact that we have produced great leaders. Other nations and other civilizations have done as much.

What is unique is the way in which generation after generation of Americans, working men and women from all national, racial, regional and religious backgrounds, have joined together to build a new Nation and new lives for themselves.

The great lesson of America is that in a free society like ours, the so-called "common man" can rise to uncommon heights of heroism, sacrifice and achievement.

That is what the American flag stood for 200 years ago and what it still stands for today -- the integrity and the worth of the individual citizen. And that is what each of us is sworn to defend.

From 13 stars, the flag has grown to 50. From 13 coastal colonies on the edge of an untamed continent, America has grown into the most productive, strongest and freest Nation in the global history.

But strength of spirit is every bit as important as wealth and territory and industrial power. What the American flag will stand for tomorrow depends on each of us today. If we live up to the trust of this Nation's founders and to the dedication of its men in uniform -- and I am confident that we will -- then the flag and the Nation we pass on to prosperity will still justify Oliver Wendell Holmes' eloquently stated vision -- in the words of "One flag, one land, one hand, one Nation, evermore."

Thank you very much.

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(AT 10:35 A.M. EDT)