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Office of the White House Press Secretary
(Ft. Lauderdale, Florida)

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED AT WILLIAMS PARK
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

I am very happy to be here today with so many people who are enjoying a long and sunny day in the Sunshine City of St. Petersburg and in the Sunshine State of Florida. The careers of Winston Churchill and others who rose to prominence in their later years remind us all, if we need to be reminded, that advancing years need not mean a retreat from an active, eventful, enjoyable life.

Nor should advancing years be the certain bearer of poor health, a meager income or social isolation. The ancient philosophers taught us that the measure of a civilization's advancement can be found in the treatment of its elders. For more than forty years, through the vehicle of social security and other programs, America has made a firm commitment of support for the older citizens of our society. I pledge to you this morning that I will continue to uphold that commitment.

In recent years there has been dramatic progress in our efforts to meet the continuing needs of America's older generation. But I want to do better, and with your help and the help of the Congress, I will. As President, I intend to do everything in my power to help our nation demonstrate its deep concern for the dignity and well-being of older Americans.

For those who need our help, we already have a number of Federal programs providing assistance in a variety of ways. The Social Security program -- the largest of its kind in the world -- will pay almost 83 billion dollars to more than 32 million Americans in fiscal year 1977. That's more than a 10 billion dollar increase over the current year.

Here in Florida, the Social Security Trust Fund will pay an estimated 4.4 billion dollars to participants in the next fiscal year. In my budget for fiscal year 1977, I am recommending that the full cost of living increases in Social Security benefits be paid during the coming year. And let me assure you of one thing very emphatically: My Administration fully intends to preserve the integrity and the solvency of the Social Security system for your benefit, and that of all American working men and women, now and in the future.

This year, it is projected that the Social Security Trust Fund will run a deficit of about three billion dollars. Next year, unless my reforms are adopted, we will run a deficit of three and a half billion dollars. If this trend continues, there will be no security for old or young. As long as I am President, we are going to keep Social Security protection and every other Federal retirement program, strong, sound and certain.

In addition to the Social Security program, we are continuing our strong commitment to benefit programs for more than three million railroad, military and Federal Government retirees. After the many years of sacrifice and hard work you have contributed to America, you have earned more than the prospect of prospect in your retirement years.

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In my new budget, the supplemental security income program, or S.S.I, will pay almost six billion dollars in Federal benefits to more than five million disabled and disadvantaged older Americans in 1977--170,000 of them right here in Florida. There have been some problems with this program, as you probably know, because the S.S.I replaced a great number of Federally-assisted state programs, and there was some confusion in the process.

We've already begun to take extensive steps to correct these problems, and we will make sure that if any American qualifies for these benefits, he or she will get them. Those that do not qualify will not be taking money you should have. In the field of health care, the Federal Medicare program in 1976 will provide more than 17 billion dollars for the health care of 24 million older and disabled Americans, about 1.4 million of them in Florida.

But there are flaws in this program which actually help raise the cost of your medical care and which fail to protect you adequately against the economic burdens of prolonged illness. I have proposed major improvements in the Medicare program to make it serve you better. One of the most important improvements is the creation of a system of health insurance that would pay all but a small fraction of the catastrophic cost of complex or extended care and treatment.

I do not have to tell you that medical treatment is very, very expensive today. Hospital costs have risen by more than 200 percent since 1965, to an average cost of 128 dollars a day. If you have to stay in a hospital or nursing home or under a doctor's care for a very long time, it puts an incredible strain on your lifetime savings and on your peace of mind. And that strain is felt by loved ones, as well.

All of us know of cases in which someone in the family or a close friend, or a member of your church has been stricken with an illness that lingers on and on and on. We know of the pain and the heartache associated with a prolonged illness. We know that being sick and bedridden for a long, long time is bad enough, without having a person's income and life savings dwindle away as the medical bills keep piling in.

This must not continue. There is no reason that older Americans should have to go broke just to get well or stay well in the United States of America. Under my proposal, the individual's contribution would go up somewhat--but consider what the increase would provide.

Nobody eligible for Medicare would have to pay more than 500 dollars a year for hospital or nursing home care. And this does not mean you pay the first 500 dollars of your total cost. You would pay only ten percent of the total cost, or 500 dollars whichever is less. And the maximum annual cost to you for covered doctor's services would be 250 dollars--or 20 percent--again, whichever is less.

Medicare would pay the rest--whether it costs a thousand dollars or 10,000 or 50,000. If the Congress passes my program, the ruinous economic burden of catastrophic illness is one thing you won't ever have to worry about again. Another one of my proposals would consolidate 16 Federal health programs, including Medicaid, into a single ten billion dollar block grant to the states.

If we can consolidate these programs, we can make them more humane and effective. We can improve the services they provide. And we can get those services to more people who really need them. Programs of this kind, despite some abuses, do a tremendous amount of good. For some of our neighbors, they provide the means for life itself. They provide the food, the services, and the health care, without which some people would not be able to enjoy this beautiful day of sunshine.

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It's all too easy to say that the Federal Government is too big--that this program and that program ought to be cut out of the Federal Budget--and tossed back to the States to cope with if their taxpayers will permit it. It's not that simple, and you and I know it. I'm as concerned as you are about the growth of the Federal budget. I've been fighting to hold it down for 27 years. You all know how I've been trying for the last 18 months to get control of the inflation which has done so much economic damage to all Americans.

During 1974, when I became President, inflation was raging at an annual rate of more than 12 percent--eating away at everybody's buying power, but absolutely devouring the livelihood of people of fixed incomes. I knew that something had to be done to bring that situation under control. I knew that deficit spending by the Federal Government was a major contributor to inflation, and that slowing the growth of Federal spending was essential to solving the problem.

I've used my constitutional veto power 46 times since becoming President, trying to hold down the level of Federal spending, trying to break the back of inflation. To hold down the cost of living, we must hold down the cost of Government.

We've made some encouraging progress with these vetoes--saving the taxpayers ten billion dollars. The inflation rate that was 12 percent has been cut nearly in half. That's not good enough, but that's progress--real progress that helps people on fixed incomes more than anybody else in our society.

Just yesterday the Department of Labor announced that Wholesale Prices stayed level in January. In fact, Wholesale Prices have shown no appreciable change since October. This is more good news in our fight against inflation--and we're going to keep the pressure on.

Too often, people forget just how far and how fast we have come as a nation. We have our problems, and we're not afraid to admit them. But I think it's time people stopped running America down. I think it's time we remembered how richly blessed this nation really is. You have seen much of America's phenomenal progress with your own eyes.

In the space of your lifetime, man has taken himself from the horse and buggy and explored the far reaches of space. Diseases which once crippled and killed millions of Americans have been conquered. America's population has more than doubled since 1910. Life expectancy, which in 1910 was only 50 years, is today more than 71 years. The Gross National Product, the index of our total production, is now seven times greater than it was in 1910. To put it another way, the strength and growth of the American economy provides the average American living today with three and a half times more in goods and services than Americans enjoyed in 1910. No other generation of Americans has ever achieved such growth.

In 1910, some 156,000 young people graduated from America's high schools. Last year's college graduates totaled 944,000. In 1910, there was no regularly scheduled radio broadcasting in the United States. Nobody had ever heard of "television". Today we are living in an age of instant and global communications.

These examples--and there are many, many more--serve to remind us of how much has changed, of how much progress there has been: in health, wealth, education, communication, law, and in every other aspect of life in America. The fact is that you--your generation--have been the greatest pioneers of progress and change in the entire history of the human race.

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But some things, thankfully, have not changed at all. We are still a people in love with freedom; and after 200 years, that love is undiminished. We are still a nation dedicated to progress and peace in the world. We are still a nation of compassion. We are still, as Lincoln called us a century ago, "The last best hope of earth."

The United States is a great country, the greatest in the world. You helped to make it that way, and this nation will never forget your contribution--past, present, or future. Nor will we ever forget the lesson which President Eisenhower taught us from the wisdom of his years: "America is not good because it is great," the President said. "America is great because it is good."

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