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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
SHERATON PARK HOTEL

2:15 P.M. EST

Mr. Walker, Mr. Fallstrom, Mr. Kiernan, Reverend Harper, members and guests of the National Association of Secondary School Principals:

Needless to say, it is a great, great honor to be reinducted after a few years into the National Honor Society which I was privileged, fortunate and probably darn lucky to join in 1930. I have just said to Mr. Walker this one is a little heavier but the other one meant a great deal more to me in 1930.

On this plaque I do see the Honor Society's requirements -- service, scholarship, leadership and character. As a high school student I was mighty proud to be thought of in those very worthy words and I am just as proud today to be thought of or thought worthy of them on this occasion, and I thank you very, very much.

Let me also thank you for your invitation to be a part of this program. The agenda for this convention show that your profession is in a time of great change and that you are addressing yourself to that change. Yet in some ways your job has not changed at all since the early days of our Nation's educational system. You still give guidance to the schools which guide our children. You are still the executors of the past and the trustees of the future.

In this Bicentennial year it is fitting that we should consider where we have been and where we are going. I would like to share with you my vision of education and its role in our Nation's progress for the future.

In our first century as a Nation America developed political institutions responsive to the people. Unity grew from diversity and education for the people was a crucial part of the Founding Fathers' vision. They knew that ignorance and freedom could not co-exist.

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A system of general instruction for all citizens, both rich and poor, was the earliest of Thomas Jefferson's public concerns. He led an unsuccessful effort to have the Virginia Assembly support a system of free public schools.

By the time the Constitution was drafted our Founding Fathers, however, clearly saw education as a State responsibility. Little more than a century later every State had a tax-supported public school system free and accessible to every child.

In our second century America's schools and colleges faced great challenges and withstood enormous pressures. They educated millions of immigrant children who spoke no English when they came to our shores. They met the challenging and changing academic career needs of students as the Nation grew more urbanized and more industrialized. American schools contributed greatly to our unprecedented economic growth and the widespread sharing of our economic gains.

Now we are entering our third century. I see this as a century devoted to the fulfillment of the individual citizen. In this century education will not only prepare young men and women to earn a living, it will also prepare them to live a richer life. It will equip them to make their own decisions rather than permit their futures to be decided for them by others. It will enrich our children's lives and it will also enrich our life, our Nation and our life in the future.

Throughout our history the Federal Government has recognized the value of education and has helped our schools and colleges. Since Abraham Lincoln signed the Act creating the land grant colleges, Federal encouragement and assistance to education has been an essential part of the American system. To abandon it now would be to ignore the past and to threaten the future, but we must make Federal aid in the area of education much more effective than it has been in the past.

In the past decade as educational problems of national scope have been identified, we have responded with a wide variety of new Federal programs to meet those needs through assistance to State and local educational agencies. Each of these programs was initiated to meet the goal of improved educational opportunities for a particular segment of our population but the result of adding program on top of program has been a maze of complex and often confusing Federal guidelines and requirements.

At Federal, State and local levels we have unwittingly created a heavy burden of varying regulations, differing standards and overlapping responsibilities. Too often we ask whether Federal forms have been properly filled out, not whether children have been properly educated.

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As President, the very first major piece of legislation that I signed 18 months ago was an omnibus education Act. It improved the distribution of Federal education funds and the administration of Federal education programs.

Soon I will be sending to the Congress my proposals to continue this improvement, and we must. The thrust of these proposals will be to consolidate Federal aid to give State and local authority far, far greater flexibility in its use, and I hope you support it.

I make this proposal to untie the red tape that binds you. I want to free you to meet the challenges of our third century, our century of individual fulfillment. Our law and custom place the major responsibility for elementary and secondary public education on State and local units of government, and the record convinces me that decisions about education made on those levels are wiser and far more responsive to community needs than the edicts of the Federal bureaucracy.

The Federal Government, while providing 7 percent of elementary and secondary funding, should not usurp the State and local role but by consolidating into block grants more than a score of existing programs we can do a lot better with our Federal dollars in your hands.

At the same time, my proposals would preserve the appropriate national concern for quality education and concentrate available funds on the needs of the handicapped and educationally deprived. Let me add that if we can achieve the kind of consolidation which will lead to a more productive use of Federal dollars, then even within tight budget constraints we can plan to increase allocations to elementary and secondary school systems throughout the United States.

The budget proposals we will submit with our consolidation proposals will reflect increases for each of the next three fiscal years. As we look ahead, we can see our educational system adapting to meet changing needs. This has already proved to be one of its great virtues.

In the 1950s, for example, America awakened to the urgent need for improved science and mathematics instruction in our Nation's schools. Our advances in technology over the last two decades show that we have met this challenge. Today we are faced with another urgent program or problem in our Nation's development.

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It is apparent that many citizens are uninformed or, worse, unconcerned about the workings of the Government and the execution of their laws. Young people, in particular, appear cynical and alienated from our Government and our legal system. Too many Americans see the law as a threat rather than as a protection. Too few have been taught to understand the way laws are created and administered and peacefully changed.

In one poll of Federal workers, more than two-thirds refused to sign an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence. Almost half did not recognize the phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident!"

These are alarming trends for any nation to face. They are especially disturbing to us now as we speak of rededicating ourselves to the enlightened spirit of our country's founders. This is a new challenge to education and this is a new challenge to you and to me, and everybody else concerned with our Nation's future.

If we find this trend distressing, can we, in all honesty, say we find it surprising? Our Nation has undergone severe shocks in the last quarter century. Our children face a world at once richer and more threatening than had ever been imagined certainly during my lifetime. Our children are less naive, I think, than any previous generation of young people. I know my children have different views about a lot of things than I did at their ages. Yet our classes in Government and in so-called civics tend to continue along the same outmoded lines.

In 1971, the American Political Science Association reported that courses presented in this area a naive, romanticized approach. The American Bar Association found civic students to be widely alienated by platitudes and chauvinism and the methods of learning by rote.

As Emerson said, the secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. This is just as true for teaching them social values as for teaching them anything else.

We cannot perpetuate our value system merely by telling our children that it is good. We can only assure its future by educating our children to admire its strengths, correct its faults and to participate effectively as citizens as they mature and become a part of our active adult society. Only then will they understand why our social values are worth preserving even though much in our society has changed. Only then will they understand why we still hold these truths to be self-evident.

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The growing movement to supply such education gives us reason to be greatly encouraged, yet most of the work in this field clearly remains before us. We must find new ways to teach students about the institutions of law and Government which will affect their lives so much and so long. We can perform no finer service for the individual student and for American society than to provide them with this necessary understanding.

One problem is that in this field, as in others, we do not yet really know how to measure the quality of education. Many of the standards we had relied on, I think many believe, have failed us. We thought we could measure quality by the student-teacher ratio. I, for one, did. Yet some studies suggest that class size within a wide range may have no effect on student achievement. We thought we could buy quick miracles in education by spending much, much more money, but the Coleman report of equality of educational opportunity and subsequent research have cast serious doubts on that idea.

It would be far easier if we could measure educational quality in dollars and cents, but apparently we cannot.

Education really relies on people and on the teachers who work in the schools, on the administrators who direct them. The clear and constant measure of educational quality is the degree of your commitment and the leadership that you provide. You deserve the thanks and, even more importantly, the support of all parents and all Americans, and on behalf of them, I thank you.

I understand the theme of this convention is Cornerstone for Tomorrow. For millions and millions of young Americans, the cornerstone of their tomorrow will be you. I have faith that you will do the job for them, for us and for those who follow, and I thank you, again, for the opportunity of being with you.

Thank you.

END (AT 2:35 P.M. EST)