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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AND  
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION  
AT THE  
WEST WILKES HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM  
WILKESBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

6:24 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very, very much my very good friend and your very great Governor, Jim Holshouser. Let's give Jim a great round of applause because he deserves it.

Bill Anderson, Hal Green, and may I say to Hal and to all of you here, we are very grateful and appreciative of the wonderful school you have, the outstanding student body, the great faculty, and all of the wonderful people of Wilkes County that have supported this great institution.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, obviously it is a great privilege and a pleasure and a high honor to have the opportunity to be in Wilkes County, and obviously I think I am among a few friends, and I thank you for it.

I am not going to try and cover all the counties that Jim did, but I understand that last night, was it, you were in Yadkin County, and let me say to those from Yadkin County to those of you who were here and all the other counties that are present on this great occasion here tonight.

You know, I have a long and a very special relationship with the people of North Carolina. About 38 years ago, I was privileged to attend the University of North Carolina Law School in the Carr Dormitory, and for nine months early in World War II, I was at the Navy pre-flight school at Chapel Hill, and then my oldest son graduated from Wake Forest three years ago.

You know, as much as I believe in a strong and prosperous American automobile industry, I am here to say that this year there is absolutely no reason to trade in your Ford on a new model. And let me add, I am proud to say this is one Ford that has been road tested by Richard Petty.

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I am very honored and very happy to say that Richard is a member of the President Ford Steering Committee here in North Carolina and I am deeply grateful for his support.

As I have gone across the country in recent months, I have enjoyed a number of question and answer sessions with people of a great many States. I am anxious to do that tonight with this wonderful audience, but let me make one or two brief comments before we get into the question and answer period.

The year 1976 is a vitally important, very critical year for America. It marks a turning point for our country as we enter the last quarter century -- last quarter of the 20th century and begin the third century of America's history of progress. It is good for us sometimes to take stock of where we have been, where we are now and where we are going as the people and as a Nation. America has come a long, long way in the last 200 years. We have grown from a very small, poor, weak, struggling collection of colonies to the greatest Nation in the history of the world, and we, all of us, 215 million Americans, can look with pride at our country.

We have come through wars, depressions, droughts, riots, assassinations, scandals, -- frankly, everything that fate could throw at us, but we have also enjoyed phenomenal economic, technological and sociological progress in America and that progress has made our way of life the envy throughout the globe.

Despite all the problems we have had, I don't think any of us would trade places with the people of any other country in the world. I wouldn't and you wouldn't.

We hear a lot of skeptical and cynical talk these days about America being in a state of decline. That's wrong and you know it and I know it.

We hear that America's best days are behind us. That's wrong. I know it and you know it.

We hear America is a second rate power in the world today. That's wrong and let me hear how you feel about it. It's wrong.

Frankly, I am sick and tired of hearing those who would run down America. I am proud of America and I am proud to be an American and I know every one of you are, too.

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I believe in this country. I believe in its values, its traditions, its institutions and, more importantly, its people. I believe in America's future. We have the capacity in this country to do just about anything we set our minds to.

America today remains the best hope of peace, the strongest guardian of freedom in the world and I am pursuing a policy of peace through strength and I can assure you that America's military capabilities are second to none and I intend to keep it that way.

But America's strength is measured by more than armaments alone. America today is the greatest agricultural power, the most prolific producer of food and fiber in the world. That is a credit to not only the mass production farmers in the middle East but also to the small family farmers right here in western North Carolina, and I compliment you for what you do.

I want to see the family farms survive and thrive in America. I want to make it easier for people to pass on their farms, the product of many years of hard work and love and faith, to their sons and to their daughters. I want to make it easier to keep those farms in the family rather than sacrificing them to the tax collector.

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I propose two measures to help promote that result. First, I proposed that Congress act to stretch out the estate tax payment at greatly reduced interest rates over a 25-year period, and secondly, I have proposed an increase in the estate exemption from \$60,000 to \$150,000.

These proposals, if enacted by the Congress, would help not only family farms, but family businesses as well. I know that family-owned businesses can use all the help that they can get. A long time ago, I worked in my father's small family-owned paint and varnish company for a lot of years in the summer so that I could go to high school and on to college and on to law school, and I know from a personal experience in that family-owned business how tough it is, but also how rewarding it is to have a successful family enterprise.

Family-owned businesses, like every other segment of our economy, suffered heavily in the worst recession in 40 years, but thanks to some strong common sense policies, I initiated at the outset of the recession, and thanks to the determination and to the courage of the American people, we are working our way out of that economic difficulty.

With one favorable indicator after another pointing the way, we are on the road to recovery and prosperity in America, and we are picking up speed every day. Even with the severe setbacks we suffered recently, today America is still the strongest and the finest nation in the history of the world.

I have never lost faith in the system of private enterprise, and personal initiative, which earned that wealth in the first place and gave us the highest standard of living in the world. I will do all that I can to see that Government regulations and red tape do not enslave free enterprise and personal freedom in America.

The heavy hand of Government has found its way in far, far too many areas of our national life. If there is one thing we must never lose sight of, that a Government big enough to give us everything we want is a Government big enough to take from us everything we have.

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We have the best system of Government in the world. It is a system laid out with great care and paid for at great, great price by patriots yearning for freedom. It is a system that can be a powerful instrument of progress, and an enduring sense of strength and security, but it must always be the servant and never the master of the American people.

We want the freedom to choose our own course and our own lives, to chart our own future on our own terms without having the Government tell us everything we can and cannot do.

The elections of 1976 will play an important role in deciding what course we chart for America's future. The future, as I see it, is one which finds Americans living in dignity and security and harmony and in peace. I see people taking pride in their work and finding pleasure and purpose and prosperity in their lives.

I see America which cherishes the old values and compassion and determination and courage. I see America which continues to stand tall and strong and free among the nations of the world.

I see America which rises to its challenges, fulfills its responsibilities and takes advantage of its opportunities for progress in every field of endeavor.

These are my goals, and this is why I am asking for your support in the challenging years ahead.

I thank you, and now I would be delighted to answer your questions.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am from Boone, North Carolina, the town that is the hometown of the best Governor North Carolina has ever known, Jimmy Holshouser.

THE PRESIDENT: That is an easy question to answer. (Laughter)

QUESTION: This is the first time I have ever had the opportunity to say this.

I would like to say also that I look forward to the coming years, the coming four years, to your leadership with commitment.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

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QUESTION: My question is this. I think Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is one of the most intelligent, probably one of the most diplomatic Secretaries of State we have ever had. When you are elected in November, do you plan to keep him on as Secretary of State? Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: I have asked the Secretary of State to stay on in that capacity as long as he will, and I hope it is a long, long, long time.

But let me tell everybody in this wonderful audience why. Secretary of State Kissinger working with me at my direction has done some of the outstanding diplomatic work on behalf of the United States and world peace, I think, of any Secretary of State in history of the United States.

He has had the confidence of the Government of Israel, the Government of Egypt and many other Arab nations, and as a result, we have made significant progress in the Middle East with the Sinai Agreement, which was signed in September.

That is the most controversial volatile area of the world, and if we don't continue to have peace in that area of the world, we will have another oil embargo, there will be another war. This is a diplomatic achievement, one of the greatest in the history of American diplomacy. But you could go down a long list of things that have been accomplished while Secretary Kissinger has been as Secretary of State, and as an Assistant to the President.

We are fortunate. We have a good foreign policy. It has got us at peace and it will keep us at peace, and we are very lucky to have that Secretary of State.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am from Wake Forest. I only missed you in Winston, so I could hear you in my hometown.

I want to know, since you mentioned oil and energy a minute ago, about the nuclear reactors with the problems of the danger and the storing of nuclear waste, and if you are in favor of building more nuclear reactors or pursuing a more or cheaper -- maybe not cheaper, but safer way of producing energy for this country?

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THE PRESIDENT: We have about 50 operating nuclear power plants at the present time. If we are going to become less and less dependent on Arab or Middle East oil, we have to, in the next ten years, develop a total of about 250 nuclear power plants throughout the country. There have been some questions raised about the security, the safety and the reliability of nuclear power plants, but let me say there has not been a single person injured by any lack of safety in nuclear power plants in the history of the United States.

We are, however, very cognizant of the concern and the worry that some people have and, therefore, in the budgets that I have submitted to the Congress for the Energy Research and Development Agency we are spending a great deal of extra money to make certain that our nuclear power plants are safe, reliable and the kind that will operate for the benefit of this country. I am convinced that our nuclear regulatory agency, our Energy Research and Development Agency, are doing everything possible to increase safety, even though it is excellent today, and to increase the reliability of those present and future nuclear power plants.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I was not questioning -- in fact, I think that nuclear reactors are very safe and I am not worried at all like about blowing up or anything like that, but my question is more with the increasing number of nuclear plants, where are we going to put the waste that has to be stored for many years before it is not dangerous any more?

THE PRESIDENT: The question of what we do with nuclear waste is a matter of major concern to me and to the experts in this field. There have been a number of proposals made for the disposal of nuclear waste. We tried several years ago to deposit them in the salt mines or the abandoned salt mines out in the State of Kansas. Some questions were raised and that proposal has been abandoned.

There are other proposals that are in the mill. No specific recommendation has come to me for the particular plan but the experts are working on it and I am certain they will find an answer, and when they make a recommendation, I will propose it and I think it will be the way in which we ought to handle the problem. We are cognizant of the difficulty, we are going to have a solution.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am a Baptist minister and my question is this, sir. Why is it that we have not had a President in the White House since Herbert Hoover that has mentioned Jesus Christ's name publicly?

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THE PRESIDENT: Mrs. Ford and -- my oldest son, Mike, is studying the ministry up at Gordon Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts. He has taken a commitment and so have I and I am proud of him and I am proud of our commitment.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. President, the municipal authorities of North Carolina are very much interested in a continuation of the revenue sharing program. Do you look with favor on the continuation of revenue sharing and the possible expansion of that program?

THE PRESIDENT: The answer is categorically yes. Almost a year ago I recommended to the Congress a five and three-quarter extension of the present revenue sharing legislation which now expires December 31, 1976. I don't understand why the Congress has done nothing because this is a program that gives to the State and to the local communities, cities, townships, about \$6 billion a year. I don't recall offhand the total amount that comes to North Carolina and all of the communities in the State, but it is substantial and that amount of money has contributed extremely significantly to the local projects and policies and programs that you can do in Wilkes County and Yadkin County and Alleghany County and all of the others, and it has added measurably to the things that the State of North Carolina can do, and let me say that this is one Federal program that is the cheapest to administer.

I told you a minute ago that about \$6 billion is turned back to the Governors and to mayors and county and township officials. Do you know what the cost is? One-twelfth of one percent. The money goes back to local units of Government, to Governors, to the State legislators, so that they can do things on the behalf of the people of a community or of a State and I hope and trust that the Congress wakes up -- they have been pretty sleepy -- about doing what they should do on this program.

We are pushing them and we are going to get some action, and if they don't act, I hope all of you will look them in the eye next November.

QUESTION: Mr. President, we are going to try to help you get a Congress that you can work with.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. President, during World War II I spent 15 months on the front lines. Should the Government forbid me to go to my home and not have a way in and out to my summer home?

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THE PRESIDENT: Would you repeat that again?

QUESTION: I have a summer home on the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Federal Government denies me the right to go through their property to my home.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I must confess that I don't understand all the details of just what the problem is, the road block or impediment might be, but let me assure you that we will take a good look at it and find why they won't let you get from the main highway to the property that you own.

I don't want to kid you, I can't give you a pat answer tonight and I don't believe in kidding anybody. I believe in straight talk, so we will find out what the answer is. If you will give your name and address, we will find out what the story is.

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QUESTION: I sent you a letter to that effect, one of your men has it, and other people are doing this so I think I should be able to.

Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we will find out.

QUESTION: One more question, Mr. President. When you are elected President in November, which we are sure you will be, will you look toward balancing the budget and reducing deficit spending to the best of your ability?

THE PRESIDENT: The answer is completely, totally, unequivocally yes.

But let me tell you how. That is the main question.

I submitted to the Congress a budget for the next fiscal year that if we hold the line on spending, it is a budget that reduces the growth in Federal spending from 11 percent, which has been the case, to 5-1/2 percent. The expected growth in Federal spending for the next fiscal year was some \$15 plus billion. I decided that the growth in Federal spending ought to be cut in half and so I recommended a budget for the next fiscal year of \$394 billion. I regret to say, and this leads to a comment you made earlier, sir, the Congress, or a majority of the Congress, is saying it can't be done. They throw up their hands and say we have got to spend more and more. I think it can be done if they will just approve my budget.

And if they approve that budget, with the limit on the spending that I proposed and they do the same in the next year, in the following year we will have a balanced budget and we can give another Federal tax decrease.

QUESTION: Mr. President, assuming that you are elected in November, do you foresee any heightening of Federal allocations for the national defense program or the space program in order that we could sustain ourselves as number one in the world in these two special areas?

THE PRESIDENT: The budget that I submitted to the Congress in January for the first time in 10 to 15 years shows an increase in the proportion of Federal expenditures for national defense and I would expect in the years ahead to do the same thing, and let me tell you why. The United States today is second to none, as I said in my prepared remarks, militarily. But for the last 10 or 15 years the percentage of Federal expenditures for national security has gone down. The expenditures in real dollars for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines has gone down.

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At the same time the expenditures by the Soviet Union for their national security forces have gone up. Our position today is sound, we can deter aggression, we can keep the peace and we can protect our national security. But if we don't approve the military budget that I submitted for the next fiscal year and the one that I will submit the next year and the one that I will submit the next year -- and all of them will be going up a bit -- the national defense of this country could be in jeopardy.

Now we have to get the Congress this year instead of cutting national security as they have, instead of cutting the funds for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, as they have been doing for the last 10 years, they have to approve the budget that I recommended this year, next year and the following year because we have to maintain our forces ready, they have to be well equipped, they have to be trained and they have to be led, and that kind of a budget that I submitted will obtain those objectives.

Now if we turn to the space program, we have the space shuttle, which is going to give us a lot of benefits outside of just exploration in space. The space program we have had has had a great many benefits in agriculture, in weather, in scientific achievements. We will have a good space program. I don't say it is going to increase, I think we can say it will maintain its present momentum and give us the benefits in science and in agriculture and weather and all of the other things.

But the main point I want to make is that we have to have adequate funding so we can buy new ships, so we can buy new weapons to protect the national security of America in the future as we have in the past.

QUESTION: Mr. President, my question has much to do with the same thing the gentleman just asked about defense. Since our involvement in Vietnam, and it is over with, in case of aggression in another country where our security is involved, you would not let the Vietnamese involvement influence you in any way in the protection of our defense?

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly would not. We had many differences in this country over our involvement in Vietnam, but I can assure you the traumatic experience that we went through will have no impact on any decision that would involve the security of the United States.

If I think it is important, it is vital, it is crucial for us to undertake some operation for the security of the United States, it will be done. I can assure you of that. I will look at the facts and make the decision. I think what I did in the case of the MAYAGUEZ is a good example of the decisiveness that I can act with when we are faced with a problem. I would do it again.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, how does it feel being President? (Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I kind of like the job. (Laughter) And I like it better every day.

And let me tell you one reason why I do -- because I have an opportunity to come to a great place like West Wilkes High School and see so many nice people.

QUESTION: Mr. President, this is my question. What are some things that young people can do to assure us of a strong America tomorrow?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think what you and all the young people can do to make a strong America tomorrow is to be the best students you can in school, to mind your mother and father every day, and to have the faith in this country which I know your mother and your father and your neighbors have.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I would just like to ask you, how do you like Wilkes County?

THE PRESIDENT: I didn't hear that.

How do I like Wilkes County? I love it.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I was wondering what your views on capital punishment are. Do you believe in it or what?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe in capital punishment for very clearly defined criminal acts. In the Federal Government I believe there should be capital punishment for espionage, for subversion, for things or acts that are against the national security of the United States.

In addition, I think capital punishment for kidnapping is a legitimate area.

Now, what a State does, of course, is within the jurisdiction of the State Legislature as well as the Governor, but there are certain acts committed against the United States where I think capital punishment is the proper remedy.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am a student at Wilkes. I am wondering, in all you do for the public, do you ever live in constant fear that your life may be taken?

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THE PRESIDENT: I never think about it because in the first place, I have a lot of faith in the American people. I have a great deal of faith and trust in the Secret Service and all of the other people who do a fine job in helping us as we travel around the country, and I just never think about it. There are much more important things to think about.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am retired from the U.S. Air Force, a Pearl Harbor survivor. What I would like to know, sir, is do you have any program with relation to pay for the retired service people of the United States?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I recognize the problem that all people who are retired have with inflationary difficulties that we have had in the country for the last 18 -- well, the last three years, really. We are making headway on that, but with the escalator clauses that we have in military retirement, Social Security, railroad retirement and so forth, I think we can honestly say that those who are retired are considered to get an adequate amount for the benefit of their future and I intend to see that those escalator clauses are maintained.

I believe that as we attack effectively inflation that those who are retired, whether it is military retirement or Social Security, railroad retirement or Government retirement, can feel a security and a sufficiency in their older years, and I will fight to maintain those.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I would like to know how you stand on marijuana and will you legalize it?

THE PRESIDENT: I do not believe in the decriminalization of marijuana, period. There are many studies that are going on but I have seen insufficient evidence to change the existing laws which make the sale or use or possession of marijuana a crime.

Thank you very, very much. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to be here. I love you all. It has been a great evening.

END (AT 7:02 P.M. EST)