Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Legion in Seattle, Washington

August 23, 1983

Thank you very much, Commander Keller, Governor Spellman, Secretary Donovan, Senator Gorton, Members of Congress who are here, and all of you, my fellow legionnaires:

I thank you for that warm greeting, and the feeling is mutual.

It's always a special pleasure to address the Legion, and today is no exception. So, Legionnaire Ronald Reagan, Pacific Palisades Post—as you've been told—283, reporting for duty. My uniforms are long since in mothballs, but one of the major responsibilities that goes with my present job is being the chief advocate for America's Armed Forces and veterans, and I take that responsibility seriously.

One of the great lessons of life is that if you set high standards and do your best to live up to them, you won't go wrong. The Legion has set high standards for itself and for our country. And as long as America lives up to your standards, America will not go wrong.

At home and abroad, our country is on the right track again. As a nation, we've closed the books on a long, dark period of failure and self-doubt and set a new course. With your continuing support and the support of millions of other patriotic, God-fearing Americans, we've come a long way. But the task we face is still a challenging one, and a lot of hard work remains to be done. But let's be sure we know what needs to be done.

We've got a few people in Washington who don't want to hear when we tell of our arms control and strategic modernization program and America's responsibility to protect peace and freedom. My own concern with these issues is nothing new, as many of you know. Three years ago at your Boston convention, I pledged to restore America's military posture so that we could promote peace while safeguarding our freedom and security. With the help of groups like the Legion, we've kept that pledge.

Our military forces are back on their feet and standing tall. Modern equipment is being delivered to the troops, training is way up, and combat readiness rates have really soared. And once again, young Americans wear their uniforms and serve their flag with pride. We're getting and keeping very good people in all of the services. We've made great progress, and we're going to make more. And I hope that makes you as proud as it does me.

I have to interrupt and tell you a little thing—and I don't mean this that these young men and women in our armed services are hostile or warlike; they know that they're the peacekeepers. But an ambassador wrote me a letter—our Ambassador to Luxembourg—and he said that he'd been up on the East German frontier and visiting the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment. And as he went back to his helicopter, he was followed by a young 19-year-old trooper, and the young man asked him if he thought he could get a message to me. Well, being an ambassador, he allowed as how he could. And the kid says, "Well, will you tell him we're proud to be here, and we ain't scared of nothing."

But while I'm on the subject of our military forces, I want to reaffirm our determination to account for every brave American who served in Southeast Asia. This administration has not forgotten and will never forget the sacrifices that they and their families have made. And we will not rest until the fullest possible accounting has been made.

The other half of restoring our military posture concerns our strategic forces. In the past, we paid a grim price for indecision and neglect—for a one-way restraint that was never returned by the other side. The resulting imbalance weakened the credibility of our nuclear deterrent, the deterrent that has been the single greatest bulwark for peace in the postwar era. While past American leaders hesitated or naively hoped for the best, the Soviet Union was left free to pile up new nuclear arsenals without any real incentives to seriously negotiate reductions.

Well, history doesn't offer many crystal-clear lessons for those who manage our nation's affairs. But there are a few, and one of them is surely the lesson that weakness on the part of those who cherish freedom inevitably leads to trouble—that it only encourages the enemies of both peace and freedom. On the other hand, history teaches us that by being strong and resolute we can keep the peace—and even reduce the threats to peace.

And that was why, at your Boston convention in 1980, I pledged to strive for arms reduction agreements—not so-called arms control agreements that permitted further growth, but real arms reductions.

We've kept that pledge, too. For the past 2S years, this administration has steadfastly followed a dual track of deterrence through modernization and the search for a more stable peace through arms reduction negotiations. There is no contradiction in this dual approach, despite what some of the critics in Washington might have you believe. The restoration of a credible deterrent and the search for real arms reductions and stability are two sides of the same coin—a coin that is inscribed with the words "peace" and "security."

Now, our efforts are designed to sustain peace, plain and simple. We don't seek an arms race; indeed, we seek to reverse the trends that cause it by beginning to lower the levels of the nuclear arms. But we will not, and we cannot, accept anything that would be detrimental to our security and to the freedom and safety of our children and our grandchildren.

And that's what is so important about the MX. The MX Peacekeeper missile and our program to develop a new, small, singlewarhead missile are critical to our country's present and future safety. They will maintain state-of-the-art readiness against the Soviets' already modernized systems. They will also ensure stability and deterrence, making it clear that aggression by the Soviet Union would never pay. And they're an essential incentive for the Soviets to negotiate seriously for genuine arms reduction so that we can move to a more stable world in which the risk of war is reduced.

Modernization goes hand in hand with deterrence. Both are necessary incentives for successful negotiations. Many of our critics willfully ignore this interrelationship. Instead, they focus their attention and their criticism on some single point which doesn't address the central issue. Often, it's based on wishful thinking or downright misinformation.

For example, one argument contends that the MX Peacekeeper would pose a first-strike threat to the Soviet Union. Well, in the most fundamental sense, this argument runs counter to the whole history of America. Our country has never started a war, and we've never sought nor will we ever develop a strategic first-strike capability. Our sole objective is deterrence, the strength and credibility it takes to prevent war.

And in any case, there is no way that the MX, even with the remaining Minuteman force, could knock out the entire Soviet ICBM force, so the argument is a false one, both philosophically and technically. What we really want and what we would have with the MX in place is enough force that tells the enemy we'd do them a lot of damage.

But the example that I've given is typical of the twisted logic of the anti-MX lobby. It reminds me of that tale told of an armed services poker game which took place a few years back on a western military base. The MP's were tipped off, raided the barracks. The four poker players just managed to hide the cards and poker chips in time. When the police got there, they were sitting at an empty table, staring innocently at each other, and the MP sergeant asked each one in turn if he'd been gambling. And the soldier bit his lip and replied, "No, sarge, I haven't been gambling." And the sailor paused, silently asked the Lord's forgiveness, and also said he wasn't gambling. And the airman answered the same way. And that finally brought them to the marine. And they said, "Have you been gambling?" And the MP looked the cop right dead in the eye and asked, "Who with?" [Laughter] That was quick thinking, but the marine sure avoided a real issue, and the real issue's what counts.

The real national defense issue of our time is maintaining deterrence while seeking arms reductions. And today I'm pleased to be able to report some good news on the negotiating front. Our fundamental negotiating positions in both the START and INF talks have been strengthened by a number of related developments that have occurred this year. Let me share a few of them with you.

First on the list is that strong, bipartisan support is beginning to surface for our strategic program. Starting with the perceptive recommendations of the Scowcroft commission, and strengthened by the bipartisan congressional support in strategic modernization votes in May and July, America has finally begun to forge a national consensus for peace and security.

The MX Peacekeeper program and the development program for a new, small, single-warhead missile will complement the B-1 bomber and Trident submarine programs, the other legs of the triad. But we aren't over the hump yet. There's still work to be done, and I'm counting on your continuing and active support as we approach the next legislative round on appropriations for the MX this autumn. If we see this mission through, the combined efforts of this administration and the Congress will restore the credibility of America's strategic posture—the essential foundation for deterrence and successful negotiations.

We've learned over and over again that only common resolve in the West can bring responsiveness from the East. And fortunately, Western allied unity today is a firm reality. Our negotiations have been preceded by close consultations with the Congress and with our allies. This process has continued

during the negotiations in Geneva, and we've given our negotiators the flexibility to explore all possible avenues with the Soviets.

"Peace" is a beautiful word, but it is also freely used and sometimes even abused. As I've said before, peace is an objective, not a policy. Those who fail to understand this do so at their peril. Neville Chamberlain thought of peace as a vague policy in the thirties, and the result brought us closer to World War II. Today's so-called peace movement—for all its modern hype and theatrics—makes the same old mistake. They would wage peace by weakening the free. And that just doesn't make sense.

My heart is with those who march for peace. I'd be at the head of the parade if I thought it would really serve the cause of peace. But the members of the real peace movement, the real peacekeepers and peacemakers, are people who understand that peace must be built on strength. And for that, the American people and free people everywhere owe all of you a deep debt of gratitude.

Like you, our allies remain united in a common effort to strengthen both deterrence and the prospect for arms reduction through negotiations. They recognize the dangers to allied unity of Soviet propaganda and thinly veiled threats—at causing NATO to abandon its dual-track decision to modernize and negotiate. If we lack the will to provide a credible deterrent, then we could look forward to ever more aggressive Soviet behavior in the future. Because NATO understands this, NATO will persevere.

When you add it all up, despite the problems, there is strong reason for hope. This administration has worked very hard over the course of many months to refine our own negotiating objectives and positions. We've developed a sound, well-thought-out strategy to achieve them. We stand united with the Congress and our allies. Our strategic triad is being modernized. We're negotiating arms reductions in good faith. And there's been encouraging movement in these negotiations.

For the first time, in the START negotiations, the Soviets are willing to actually talk about actual reductions. In Vienna, at the mutual balanced force reduction talks, the Soviet negotiators have shown movement on the verification issues needed to permit us to negotiate reductions in the conventional force safely. There has also been progress in discussing confidence-building measures. All these indicators, modest though they may seem, point in the same positive direction—new hope for arms reductions and a more secure world.

Let's not kid ourselves. There are lots of ambiguities, and we've still got a long way to go, a long way from agreement. Plenty of tough, hard bargaining remains to be done at the negotiating table. But I can assure you that our highest priority is focused on this, the most challenging and important issue of our lifetime, and we're making headway for peace.

Another issue of critical importance to all Americans—and one I view as the centerpiece of American foreign policy—concerns our responsibility as peacemaker.

We can't build a safer world with honorable intentions and good will alone. Achieving the fundamental goals our nation seeks in world affairs—peace, human rights, economic progress, national independence, and international stability—means supporting our friends and defending our interests. Our commitment as peacemaker is focused on these goals. Right now this commitment is most visible in Central America, the Middle East, and Africa.

Our policy in Central America is to help the people of that troubled region help themselves—help them to build a better life, to help them toward liberty, and to help them reverse centuries of poverty and inequity. And that's what they want, too. In Costa Rica, democracy and respect for human rights are a long and proud tradition. In Honduras, democratic institutions are taking root. In El Salvador, democracy is beginning to work even in the face of externally supported terrorism and guerrilla warfare.

We know that democracy in Central America will not be built overnight. But step by step, with humanitarian, economic, and private sector assistance from the United States, it can and will be achieved.

And that's why we established the Caribbean Basin Initiative, a program designed to help the people in that region help themselves. The Caribbean Basin Initiative is based on a combination of trade and private investment incentives. We decided to listen and learn from what our neighbors have been saying for a long time—that the best thing we could do is to help them build a better, freer life for themselves. We agree, and though you wouldn't know it from some of the coverage, by far the greatest portion of our aid to Central America is humanitarian and economic.

Now, there are some—in Moscow and Havana—who don't want to let our Caribbean neighbors solve their problems peacefully. They seek to impose their alien form of totalitarianism with bullets instead of ballots. And that's why we're supporting a security shield for those nations that are threatened.

Unless that shield is there, democracy, reform, economic development, and constructive dialog and negotiations cannot survive and grow. Other than training our own troops, this is the only purpose behind our military exercises—to demonstrate our commitment to the free aspirations and sovereign integrity of our neighbors.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Human rights means working at problems, not walking away from them. Would America be America if, in their hour of need, we abandoned our nearest neighbors? From the tip of Tierra del Fuego to Alaska's Point Barrow, we're all Americans. We worship the same God, cherish the same freedom. Can we stand idly by and allow a totalitarian minority to destroy our common heritage?

Our concern is justice. Has communism ever provided that? Our concern is poverty. Has a Communist economic system ever brought prosperity? No. If the United States were to let down the people of Central America—people who are struggling for the democratic values that we share—we would have let ourselves down, too. We could never be certain of ourselves, much less of the future, if we turned our back on our nearest neighbors' struggle for peace, freedom, and evolving democracy.

In the Middle East, the pursuit of peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors remains another fundamental objective of this administration. Yes, it's a thorny problem, and our negotiators have faced serious difficulties over the past 2 1/2 years. But there's been real progress.

The Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt in April of 1982. This essential step in the establishment of peace between Egypt and Israel wouldn't have been possible without our decision to contribute to the multinational force and observers that are currently operating in the Sinai.

In Lebanon, our marines continue to serve alongside their French, British, and Italian comrades as we work for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from that troubled land. Our joint presence strengthens the resolve of the Lebanese Government to assume the tough task of maintaining order.

We Americans covet no foreign territory, and we have no intention of becoming policeman to the world. But as the most powerful country in the West, we have a responsibility to help our friends keep the peace. And we should be proud of our achievements and especially proud of the fine men and women of our Armed Forces who undertake these tough yet vital tasks.

In Africa, we're engaged in a parallel commitment—economic development, the growth of democracies, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. And here, too, our emphasis is on developmental and economic assistance.

We maintain only a handful of military advisers on the whole African continent. Our economic aid is four times larger than what we spend on security assistance. Contrast this with what the Soviet Union is doing. The record shows that since the Soviets began their aid program to Africa in 1954, military aid has outpaced all other Soviet aid by 7 to 1. Then add more than 40,000 Soviet and surrogate military personnel stationed in Africa, and it's no wonder that Africa is rife with conflict and tension.

For our part, we're actively working to defuse the tensions and conflict in Namibia and Angola while we help fight poverty in the region. In Chad, the United States is a partner in a multinational economic assistance package designed to get this tragically poor and strife-torn country on its feet. But without protection from external aggression, there can be no economic progress. And naked, external aggression is what is taking place in Chad today.

Drawing upon the nearly \$10 billion worth of Soviet military equipment and munitions now in Libya, Colonel Qadhafi has been using Soviet-built fighter bombers, T55 tanks, and artillery in a blatant attempt to destroy a legitimate government. President Habre and the people of his country are truly beleaguered as they struggle to preserve their independence. It is in this context that we have joined a number of other countries in providing emergency security assistance to Chad.

Yes, in Africa there is real reason for concern. But there are also harbingers of hope. Less than 2 weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting with President Diouf of Senegal. He's a great man doing a great job. His outstanding leadership has brought Senegal fully into the community of truly democratic states. And a similar democratic success story has just taken place in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, where free Presidential

elections were successfully completed last week.

That's right, there's a democratic revolution going on in this world. It may not grab the headlines, but it's there, and it's growing. The tide of history is with the forces of freedom—and so are we.

That's the real message, and that's the overwhelming news story of our time, even though it seldom makes the front page. The light of the democratic ideal is not slowly fading away. It gains in brightness with every passing day, but it needs our care and cultivation.

You know, Mark Twain once remarked that he spent \$25 to research his family tree, and then he had to spend \$50 to cover it up. [Laughter] Well, America is more fortunate. We can be proud of our heritage, and we need never hide from our roots. The world we live in is not an easy one, but we've inherited a noble mission, a mission that casts a beacon of hope for all the Earth's people.

America, more than anything, wants lasting peace—peace with liberty, with justice, and with the freedom to follow the dictates of God and conscience. To succeed, we will need wisdom, strength, and imagination. We'll need patience and vigor. But to seek anything less would be to deny our heritage and the real meaning of our great nation.

You know, our national anthem is probably the only one that asks a question: Does that banner still wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave? When Francis Scott Key wrote that, he was asking if our flag was still flying. Well, today we know the flag still flies. But what we continue to answer is that it does wave over a people that are still free and still brave and determined to preserve this land for generations to come.

Thank you for all that you and the Legion are doing to help America stay true to this quest, and God bless you all. Thank you.

Note: The President spoke at 12 noon in the Seattle Center Mercer Forum Arena. He was introduced by Albert Keller, Jr., national commander of the American Legion.

Following his remarks, the President met with Republican Party donors and attended a fund-raising reception for the Republican Party at the Seattle Center. He then returned to Los Angeles, Calif, and the Century Plaza Hotel, where he remained overnight.

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