

# Remarks at the High School Commencement Exercises in Glassboro, New Jersey

## June 19, 1986

Governor Kean, President Beach, Mr. Mayor, Superintendent Mitcho, Principal Holland, ladies and gentlemen, and especially you the Glassboro High School class of 1986, thanks for the greeting, but I know why you're so enthusiastic. You probably heard about my earlier Hollywood connections and think I might be able to introduce you to Tom Cruise or Michael J. Fox. [Laughter]

You know, your principal, Mr. Holland, showed me your American history book, and I was startled to see that it took almost 400 pages to tell the story of our nation. When I was your age, it only took two stone tablets. [Laughter] But there are advantages to being President. The day after I was elected, I had my high school grades classified top secret. [Laughter] By the way, I understand this is the biggest crowd, here in the gym, since the last time the Bulldog basketball team played a home game. [Laughter] Am I correct in thinking there may be one or two Bulldog fans here today? [Applause] I was looking at those championship banners back there.

Seriously, it is an honor to join you today for this commencement ceremony, an event that marks your coming of age and means so much to you and your families. And I know you want to join me in congratulating your principal, Roy Holland, on 11 years of outstanding service. [Applause]

But what I have to say today I've come to say to you, the students of Glassboro High School, who are about to graduate. Mothers and fathers, families and friends, you have our permission to eavesdrop, but you must understand that this is between us, one who has seen more than seven decades of American life and the bright young people seated before him, who have not yet seen all of two. Glassboro High School class of 1986, if we had time today, I might talk with you about good citizenship, all that we've been trying to achieve in Washington, or even the things I think we both enjoy, things like football games and going to the beach.

It's hard for you to believe that grown-ups, parents, et cetera, can understand how you feel and what it's like to be your age. When you get to be parents yourselves, you'll be surprised how clear your memories will be of these days at Glassboro High. You'll remember how you felt about things, about successes, and, yes, disappointments. You'll discover as you get older that certain things are so much a part of your life that you'll remember them always, and high school, I assure you, is one. But as I was saying, it's in the very nature of time that it runs on more quickly than any of us would wish, and I must compress all that I want to say into a few brief and fleeting minutes. Now, perhaps that in itself represents one of the lessons that I can impart: the preciousness of each moment. And if you're ever a commencement speaker, try to keep in mind the importance of brevity in a speech.

You know every generation is critical of the generation that preceded it and feels it must discard many of the mores and customs of those who had gone before. Our generation felt that way, and so will yours. But in casting aside the old, don't throw out those values that have been tested by time just because they're old. They're old because their value has been proven by many generations over the years and, yes, the centuries. Now, I know that in recent days you've been bidding farewell to your teachers and friends, and I wonder whether you've noticed as you've done so that this time of year tends to bring out some old and familiar phrases -- phrases like, "The future belongs to you," and "You are the hope of tomorrow." I must tell you that each of these phrases speaks deep truths. You are the future. Oh, the phrases may sometimes sound worn, perhaps because you've already heard them so many times. And they can seem inadequate to your parents and me because we want to tell you all that we have learned.

We want to paint for you our own experience so vividly that you'll be able to avoid our heartaches while you double and redouble your joys. And then we find we have nothing at our disposal but words, weak and feeble instruments that cannot possibly carry the full freight of our meaning. Still, we must try. Every modicum of knowledge that can be truly and rightly transmitted from one generation to the next can prove invaluable. So it is that I want to speak to you about this nation of which you'll so soon become the leaders, in particular about those qualities of our national life that we Americans have always cherished in our own country and hoped to extend to all the world: freedom and peace. Perhaps you could think of our talk on this matter as writing a high school essay, an essay on peace, one last assignment before we let you go.

English teachers sometimes suggest opening essays vividly, with a dramatic scene or story that helps to set the tone. Well, it so happens that you and I have just such a dramatic story at hand. For 19 years ago, the very year before most of you were born, Glassboro received a visit from the President of the United States. In June of 1967 President Johnson flew from the White House to Glassboro -- just as I've done today -- to hold a summit meeting with Soviet Premier Kosygin. The meeting was scheduled to last 1 day, but the two men talked for more than 5 hours, then held a second meeting 2 days later. If you were to research the meeting in your school library, you would find that the U.S. News wrote that "Among the problems they discussed were some of the world's biggest: Vietnam, the Middle East, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

Well, today historians have concluded that the Glassboro summit was not, in fact, one of the most momentous. No major breakthroughs were made or agreements reached. Nevertheless, the two men met. They were frank. They worked to understand each other and to make themselves understood. In this alone, I would submit, they taught us a great deal. Let us then remain mindful of that Glassboro summit of 19 years ago. And let us remember that as we look back upon the Glassboro summit, others -- perhaps 19 years in the future -- will look back upon us. It's my fervent hope that they will say we worked to break the patterns of history that all too often resulted in war, that we reached for accord, that we reached for peace.

Hope finds its expression in hard work. So, let us move on to the body of our essay and the tasks of analysis and organization. Let us begin by considering our attitude toward our country and ourselves. Certainly the American story represents one of the great epics of human history. Yet ours is a story of goodness as well as of greatness. After World War II our goodness received a dramatic manifestation in the Marshall plan -- the vast program of assistance to help war-ravaged nations recover from World War II. And we can be proud that we helped restore not only our allies but those who had been our enemies as well. Pope Pius XII said of us at that time: "The American people have a genius for splendid and unselfish action, and into the hands of America, God has placed the destinies of an afflicted humanity." And in our own times, the United States continues to bear the burdens of defending freedom around the world. Listen to the words of former Prime Minister of Australia John Gorton: "I wonder if anybody has thought what the situation of comparatively small nations would be if there were not in existence the United States, if there were not this great, giant country prepared to make those sacrifices."

Do we have faults? Of course. But we have as well the courage and determination to correct them. Consider the darkest blot upon our history: racial discrimination. We fought the Civil War and passed the 13th and 14th amendments to bring slavery to an end. But discrimination still made itself felt. But so did the American sense of decency, and this ultimately gave rise to the civil rights movement. Sweeping legislation was passed to ensure that all Americans, regardless of race or background, would be able to participate fully in the life of the Nation. Today bigotry has been beaten down, but not yet totally destroyed. It falls now to you to carry on the battle. So, fight racism; fight anti-Semitism; fight in all its variations the bigotry and intolerance that we Americans have worked so hard to root out. I make much of all we've done to combat discrimination in our country because it seems to me of central importance to our essay on peace. Here in this green and gentle land people of all nations, people of all races and faiths, have learned to live in harmony to build one nation.

Nor is the story over. Listen indeed to this roll of some of your schoolmates: born in India, Sajad and Khatija Bilgrami; born in China, Wun Ting Geng; born in Japan, Tomoko Sasaki; and born in Laos, Bounmy Chomma and Rasami Sengvoravong and Sisouva Phatsodavong. If ever in coming years you grow disillusioned with your nation, if ever you doubt that America holds a special place in all the long history of humankind, remember this moment and these names that I've just read, and then you'll understand. You'll find new strength. And then you know how it is that we Americans can look to all the other peoples of this planet with self-confidence and generous friendship. Call it mysticism if you will; I have always believed there was some divine plan that placed this great land between the two oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth -- those people who had in common that extra love of freedom and that extra ounce of courage that would enable them to pack up, leave their friends and relatives and homeland to seek their future in this blessed place.

And that brings me to the international scene and our relations with the Soviet Union. It's important to begin by distinguishing between the peoples inside the Soviet Union and the government that rules them. Certainly we have no quarrel with the peoples, far from it. Yet we must remember the peoples in the Soviet Union have virtually no influence on their government. There's a little story that indicates what I mean. It seems that an American and a Soviet citizen were having a discussion about who had more freedom. And the American said, "Look, I can march into the White House, the Oval Office, and I can pound the desk and say to the President, 'Mr. President, I don't like the way you're running our country.'" And the Soviet citizen said, "Well, I can do that." And the American said, "You can?" He said, "Yes, I can walk into the Kremlin, into the General Secretary Gorbachev's office, and I can say, 'Mr. General Secretary, I don't like the way President Reagan's running his country.'" [Laughter] Well, you know, I told that story to General Secretary Gorbachev in Geneva. And thank goodness he laughed, too. [Laughter]

We must remember that the Soviet Government is based upon and drawn from the Soviet Communist Party -- an organization that remains formally pledged to subjecting the world to Communist domination. This is not the time to delve deeply into history, but you should know that the emergence of the Soviet Union is in many respects an expression of the terrible enchantment with the power of the state that became so prominent in the first half of our century. In his widely acclaimed book, "Modern Times," Paul Johnson has argued just this point: that modern ideologies had exalted the state above the individual.

This rise of state power affected my life as it did the lives of many of your parents and nearly all of your grandparents. In the late 1920's I graduated from high school full of hope and expectation, like you today. Then just as I'd established myself in a career, and just as my generation had established itself, we were at war. We fought valiantly and well, but not without a sense of all that might have been. In the end representative government defeated statism. Indeed, Japan, Germany, and Italy, once our deadly enemies, all soon became thriving democracies themselves and are now our staunchest allies. But not the Soviet Union; there statism persists.

You know, there's something you should be very proud of and aware of. Back through the history of man there have been revolutions many times. Ours was unique. Ours was the only revolution that said, we, the people, control the government. The government is our servant. Those other revolutions just exchanged one set of rulers for another set of rulers. Well, what then are we to make of the Soviet Union? My own views upon the character of the regime are well known. And I am convinced that we must continue to speak out for freedom, again and again, making the crucial moral distinctions between democracy and totalitarianism. So, too, I am convinced that we must take seriously the Soviet history of expansionism and provide an effective counter.

At the same time, we must remain realistic about and committed to arms control. It is indeed fitting to pay particular attention to arms negotiations in these days, for if the Soviet Union proves willing, this can represent a moment of opportunity in relations between our nations. When I met Mr. Gorbachev last November in Geneva, he and I agreed to intensify our effort to reduce strategic arms. We agreed

on the next steps: negotiating a 50-percent reduction in strategic nuclear forces and an interim agreement to cover intermediate-range missiles. And we both spoke of the ultimate goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons.

By November 1st we had presented new strategic arms reduction proposals designed to bridge the gap between earlier Soviet and American proposals. Our proposal would've achieved a 50-percent reduction in strategic nuclear forces in a manner both equitable and responsible. Then in mid-February we proposed a detailed, phased approach for eliminating an entire class of weapons -- the so-called longer range intermediate-range weapons, or INF's -- by 1990. And we repeated our offer of an "open laboratories" exchange of visits to facilities performing strategic defense research. Until recently the Soviet response has been disappointing in a number of ways. But in recent weeks, there have been fresh developments. The Soviets have made suggestions on a range of issues, from nuclear powerplant safety to conventional force reductions in Europe. Perhaps most important, the Soviet negotiators at Geneva have placed on the table new proposals to reduce nuclear weapons. Now, we cannot accept these particular proposals without some change, but it appears that the Soviets have begun to make a serious effort.

If both sides genuinely want progress, then this could represent a turning point in the effort to make ours a safer and more peaceful world. We believe that possibly an atmosphere does exist that will allow for serious discussion. I have indicated to General Secretary Gorbachev my willingness for our representatives to meet to prepare for the next summit. The location is unimportant. What matters is that such a meeting take place in mutual earnestness so that we can make progress at the next summit.

Certainly Mr. Gorbachev knows the depth of my commitment to peace. Indeed, when we went to Geneva my advisers told me that if we could achieve nothing more than an agreement to meet again, if we could do no more than that, then all our work at that summit would have been worthwhile. Well, on the first day of meetings, Mr. Gorbachev and I took a little walk together alone. He happened to mention that there was a great deal in the Soviet Union that he wanted me to see, and I answered that I wished that he could visit the United States. Next thing you knew, we had an agreement to meet here in 1986 and in the Soviet Union in 1987. Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?

In this essay on peace, then, we can assert that the time has come to move forward. Let us leave behind efforts to seek only limits to the increase of nuclear arms and seek instead actual arms reductions -- the deep and verifiable reductions that Mr. Gorbachev and I have agreed to negotiate. The goal here is not complicated. I am suggesting that we agree not on how many new, bigger, and more accurate missiles can be built, but on how to reduce and ultimately eliminate all nuclear missiles.

Let us leave behind, too, the defense policy of mutual assured destruction, or MAD, as it's called, and seek to put in its place a defense that truly defends. You know -- let me interrupt right here and say that possibly you haven't considered much about this system. This MAD policy, as it's called -- and incidentally, MAD stands for mutual assured destruction, but MAD is also a description of what the policy is. It means that if we each keep enough weapons that we can destroy each other, then maybe we'll both have enough sense not to shoot those weapons off. Well, that's not exactly the way for the world to go on, with these massed terribly destructive weapons aimed at each other and the possibility that some day a madman somewhere may push a button and the next day the world starts to explode. Even now we're performing research as part of our Strategic Defense Initiative that might one day enable us to put in space a shield that missiles could not penetrate, a shield that could protect us from nuclear missiles just as a roof protects a family from rain.

And let us leave behind suspicion between our peoples and replace it with understanding. As a result of the cultural exchange agreement Mr. Gorbachev and I signed in Geneva, the Soviet Union has already sent to our nation, just recently, the Kirov Ballet and an exhibition of impressionist paintings. We in

turn will send to the Soviet Union scholars and musicians. Indeed, the Russian-born American pianist Vladimir Horowitz has already performed in Moscow. And we hope to see a large increase in the number of everyday citizens traveling between both countries. Just last week at the White House I met with high school students your age who will visit the Soviet Union this summer. Surely it's in our interest that the peoples in the Soviet Union should know the truth about the United States. And surely it can only enrich our lives to learn more about them. As a matter of fact, I believe with all my heart that if a generation of young people throughout the world could get to know each other, they would never make war upon each other.

This brings us at last to our conclusion. If I may, then, a few final thoughts, from the heart. I have tried to speak to you today of peace and freedom. As your President it's my duty to do so, and because in my lifetime I have seen our nation at war four times. During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of Americans died, including friends and relatives of mine and including friends and relatives of your families. Perhaps some of you have pictures in your homes of great-uncles you never knew, soldiers who fell fighting. The Soviets suffered even more painfully than we. As many as 20 million people in the Soviet Union died in World War II, and the western third of their country was laid waste -- parallel, if you will, to what would be the destruction of all the United States east of Chicago.

All the world has cherished the years of relative peace that have followed. In the United States we have seen the greatest economic expansion and technological breakthroughs known to man -- the landing on the Moon, the development of the microchip. But our greatest treasure has been that you, our children, have been able to grow up in prosperity and freedom. It falls to us now -- as it soon shall fall to you -- to preserve and strengthen the peace. Surely no man can have a greater goal than that of protecting the next generation against the destruction and pain of warfare that his own generation has known. There can, therefore, be no more important task before us than that of reducing nuclear weapons. I am committed -- utterly committed -- to pursuing every opportunity to discuss and explore ways to achieve real and verifiable arms reductions. What our two nations do now in arms control will determine the kind of future that you and, yes, your children and your children's children will face.

So, I have come here today to say that the Glassboro summit was not enough, that indeed the Geneva summit was not enough, that talk alone, in short, is not enough. I've come here to invite Mr. Gorbachev to join me in taking action -- action in the name of peace. My friends, let us dare to dream that when you return for your own son or daughter's graduation, you'll do so in a world at peace, a world that celebrates human liberty, and a world free from the terror of nuclear destruction. And let us work -- first my generation, then soon, very soon, your own -- to make that dream come true.

But here again, mere words convey so little. There are moments, indeed, when those of my generation fear that your youth and health and good fortune will prove too much for us -- too much for us who must tell you that good fortune is not all that life can present, that this good fortune has come to you because others have suffered and sacrificed, that to preserve it there will come times when you, too, must sacrifice. Then our fears are dispelled. It happens when we turn from our own thoughts to look at you. We see such strength and hope, such buoyancy, such good will, such straightforward and uncomplicated happiness. And if we listen, before long we hear joyful laughter. And we know then that God has already blessed you and that America has already imprinted the love of peace and freedom on your hearts. We look at you, and no matter how full our own lives have been, we say with Thomas Jefferson, "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past."

Congratulations, class of 1986, and God bless all of you.

Note: The President spoke at 5:30 p.m. in the high school gymnasium. In his opening remarks, he referred to Gov. Thomas Kean; George Beach, Jr., president, Glassboro School Board; William L. Dalton, mayor; Nicholas Mitcho, school superintendent; and Ralph Holland, principal of the high school.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/61986e.htm>

