

Fellow Countrymen: Four years ago, when last we gathered here, an American Army of half a million soldiers was engaged in hostilities on a distant continent. Though a united America had sent those forces abroad, as the conflict endured inconclusively the wisdom and character of the war had become subjects of national division. Incivility marked our public discourse. Domestic discord and violence, unfamiliar to Americans, had befallen our cities. Turmoil and disorder had become commonplace at great centers of learning. A disillusioning decade, conceived in hope and expectation, had issued in disappointment and despair.

Demoralized in spirit, the nation called forth a new leadership to chart a new course.

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And just as four decades ago, America began to emerge from the "crisis of material things," so, as we crossed the threshold of the new decade, America began to awaken from her dark night of the soul. Four summers have passed without recurrence of racial violence in our cities. Students and scholars have returned to their studies. Much of the poison has been drawn off the political dialogue. And though we of this generation, young and old, soldiers and civilians, shall carry with us to the grave the scars of this Asian conflict, America is coming home from Vietnam.

Half a million soldiers have returned from the theater of war. No longer do hundreds of mothers and fathers weekly receive notice of the death of their sons. And though the day of armistice and peace yet eludes us, the day cannot be far away when American arms are silent and American prisoners are home.

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We are today not the same people who entered the past decade. The innocence and spirit of that time has been lost with the gaining of the knowledge that comes to nations, as to individuals, through suffering. But, if the tragic decade is not to be re-enacted in our time, America must learn from the mistakes of the past.

Neither the agonies of Vietnam, nor the disruptions of our society were the fruit of evil men bent upon evil purposes. Rooted in misunderstanding not malice, the decisions that issued in failure were made by men of high competence and good will; sins of the head, not sins of the heart.

In Asia, we mistook our own enormous wealth and power for omnipotence and misjudged the tenacity and resourcefulness of our adversaries. We did not comprehend fully the uncompromising character of their ambition and intent. At home, ironically for a nation built by individuals, we came to believe that the ancient conditions of poverty and racial division would fall away before the mighty engine of modern government. In the enthusiasm of the age, the nation made promises no government could keep, raised hopes no policy could realize.

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From the great hopes there issued great expectations.

Unrealized these led to disillusionment, frustration and despair. The revelation that America was not omnipotent in world affairs generated the belief among many that America was henceforth powerless to affect the destiny of men. When the ancient ills of poverty and discrimination endured despite our exertions there arose the contention, utterly false, that our efforts had not been in earnest. The land that had produced for its citizens the greatest human freedom and material abundance known to mankind found itself condemned by its own as a counterfeit and fraud. Because we did not meet the Utopian standards set up for America, America was found in the eyes of its harshest judges, its own citizens, not worth defending, preserving or loving.

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The same voices that a decade before were promising to lead this nation to a New Jerusalem now ask us to heed their counsel of despair. Well, America cannot afford the folly of listening to their counsel anew; there is too much asked of this nation by its own people, and too little time in which to succeed.

An unhealthy preoccupation with failures and shortcomings that blinds us to our achievements is unworthy of us as a people. And unworthy of the history of the American Republic. We have nothing to learn from and no time to listen to those who counsel despair. The history of this nation has shown such sentiments un-American in character.

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Neither the interventionism of the recent past nor the isolation of American adolescence accords with current conditions. Cognizant alike of our strengths and limitations, we must deal with the world as it is, not as we would wish it to be.

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Though sometimes mistaken, American postwar policy has been anything but immoral; it is something to be proud of, not ashamed of. Indeed, had the Americans not been a generous and magnanimous people in the postwar era, what there is of peace and freedom among men today would be immeasurably diminished.

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In this postwar era Americans have drunk often and deep from the cup of bitterness. We have come to realize that the world judges America and Americans by a higher standard than the world judges itself. We have come to understand that the rewards of leadership are not always respect and friendship, but often anguish, ingratitude and envy. In a quarter century we have invested a hundred thousand American lives and hundreds of billions in American treasure in the defense of freedom; and nations with whom we are allied are indifferent to what we have done.

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In this era of American affluence and power the nation needs self-confidence demonstrated in the days of poverty and weakness.

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In building a better America we confront, as ever, many difficulties. Poverty and discrimination endure. Though the rise in criminal conduct seems abated, it remains at levels unacceptable. New sources of energy and power must be located and harnessed. Our natural heritage suffers yet from spoliation and neglect. But, alongside the dangers and trials confronted by our ancestors, the difficulties of our day are as foothills to the Rockies. What are our petty grievances and complaints alongside the suffering and anguish of generations of citizens, immigrants and slaves who built out of a wilderness this great nation. Why then this fashionable despair, this bemoaning of the difficulties that lie before us, this demeaning of the unprecedented progress already made.

Only a spirit of defeatism infecting her people can prevent America's uninterrupted march toward her manifest destiny as the leader of free men.

What is the poverty of today to the poverty of yesterday? The discrimination of today to the slavery of a century ago, or the second-class citizenship of a generation ago? What is needed today in America, as perhaps never before, is a sense of perspective on the part of this people, an understanding of history, a recognition of duties and responsibilities as well as rights and privileges, replacement of the rising spirit of self-aggrandizement with the spirit of self-denial, subordination of the personal ambition to the public good.

In this self-indulgent era, Americans would do well to emulate the self-sacrifices of their fathers and forefathers. The world knows that Americans possess the ingenuity, the resources and the wealth to maintain their pre-eminence among nations and peoples. What they have come to question is whether Americans retain that character and virtue requisite of a great and free people?

I do not speak these thoughts in despair, but in hope. And if the sons and daughters of the privileged have lost the confidence that is the quintessence of great leadership, then America can draw anew upon the infinite resources within her own people. In your hands, my fellow countrymen, not in mine lies the answer as to whether the close of the second century of American independence will witness the end of the American era or the onset of the golden age of the American Republic.

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