

# Remarks at the Recommissioning Ceremony for the U.S.S. New Jersey in Long Beach, California

**December 28, 1982**

Secretary Lehman, I thank you. Captain Fogarty, the officers and members of the crew, the other distinguished guests:

Secretary of Defense Weinberger would be here, but with all of us here he felt that someone had to stay in Washington and mind the store.

Surrounded by all this Navy blue and gold, I've had the strange feeling that I'm back on the set filming "Hellcats of the Navy." [Laughter] That was a picture that was based on a great, victorious operation of the Navy in World War II in the Sea of Japan called "Operation Hellcat." I remember at the time I was in love with my leading lady. She is Nancy, my wife, and I'm still in love with her, but I have to confess that today I find myself developing a great respect for the leading lady in these ceremonies. She's gray, she's had her face lifted, but she's still in the prime of life, a gallant lady: the New Jersey.

I'm honored to be here for the recommissioning of this mighty force for peace and freedom. Putting this great ship back to work protecting our country represents a major step toward fulfilling our pledge to rebuild America's military capabilities. It marks the resurgence of our nation's strength. It's a strength we can afford. We cannot afford to lose it.

Since the founding of our Armed Forces during the Revolutionary War, our country has always done without large standing armies and navies. Our great success story -- unique in history -- has been based on peaceful achievements in every sphere of human experience. In our two centuries of continuous democracy, we've been the envy of the world in technology, commerce, agriculture, and economic potential.

Our status as a free society and world power is not based on brute strength. When we've taken up arms, it has been for the defense of freedom for ourselves and for other peaceful nations who needed our help. But now, faced with the development of weapons with immense destructive power, we've no choice but to maintain ready defense forces that are second to none. Yes, the cost is high, but the price of neglect would be infinitely higher.

Another great power in the world sees its military forces in a different light. The Soviet Union has achieved sheer power status only by -- or I should say superpower status only by virtue of its military might. It has done so by sacrificing and ignoring achievement in virtually any and every other field.

In contrast, America's strength is the bedrock of the Free World's security, for the freedom we guard is not just our own. But over the past years we began to drift dangerously away from what was so clearly our responsibility. From 1970 to 1979, our defense spending, in constant dollars,

decreased by 22 percent. The Navy, so vital to protecting our interests in faraway troublespots, shrank -- as you've been told by the Secretary -- from more than a thousand ships to 453.

Potential adversaries saw this unilateral disarmament, which was matched in all the other services, as a sign of weakness and a lack of will necessary to protect our way of life. While we talked of detente, the lessening of tensions in the world, the Soviet Union embarked on a massive program of militarization. Since around 1965, they have increased their military spending, nearly doubling it over the past 15 years.

In a free society such as ours, where differing viewpoints are permitted, there will be people who oppose defense spending of any kind at any level. There are others who believe in defense, but who mistakenly feel that the Department of Defense is inherently wasteful and unconcerned about cost cutting. Well, they're dead wrong.

Waste in government spending of any kind is an ever-present threat. But I can assure our fellow citizens there is no room for waste in our national defense. A dollar wasted is a dollar lost in the crucial effort to build a safer future for our people. Secretary Weinberger and the members of this administration are committed to spending what is necessary for defense to secure the peace and not a penny more. As the recommissioning of this ship demonstrates, we are rearming with prudence, using existing assets to the fullest.

To those who've been led to believe that we've gone overboard on national security needs and are spending a disproportionate share on the military, let me state: This is not true.

In spite of all the sound and fury that we hear and read, defense spending as a percentage of gross national product is well below what it was in the Eisenhower and Kennedy years. The simple fact is that, by reforming defense procurement, by stressing efficiencies and economies in weapons system production, we have been able to structure and fund a defense program our nation can afford. It meets the threat, and it provides wages and benefits that are more akin to what our men and women in uniform deserve.

Already, we're realizing tremendous dividends from our defense program. The readiness of our forces is dramatically improved. As you've just been told, we're more than meeting our recruitment goals. And we've had congressional support for such key initiatives as the purchase of two aircraft carriers, the B - 1 bomber, and the C - 5 transport plane.

As a nation, we're committed to take every step to substantially reduce the possibility of nuclear war, while providing an unshakable deterrent to such a war for ourselves and our allies. To this end, we're closing the window of vulnerability by instituting a comprehensive strategic force modernization program.

But while we do this, we're advancing vigorous arms control proposals aimed at deep and verifiable reductions in strategic nuclear missiles. We have proposed that intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe be reduced to zero on both sides at the same time we cut conventional forces in Europe to balanced levels. And I may say, the news is encouraging. The Soviet Union has met us halfway on the zero option. They've agreed to zero on our part. [Laughter]

We can't shut our eyes to the fact that, as the Soviet military power increased, so did their willingness to embark on military adventures. The scars are plainly evident in a number of Third World countries. We're also aware that, though the Soviet Union is historically a land power -- virtually self-sufficient in mineral and energy resources and land-linked to Europe and the vast stretches of Asia -- it has created a powerful, blue-ocean navy that cannot be justified by any legitimate defense need. It is a navy built for offensive action, to cut the Free World's supply lines and render impossible the support, by sea, of Free World allies.

By contrast, the United States is a naval power by necessity, critically dependent on the transoceanic import of vital strategic materials. Over 90 percent of our commerce between the continents moves in ships. Freedom to use the seas is our nation's lifeblood. For that reason, our Navy is designed to keep the sealanes open worldwide, a far greater task than closing those sealanes at strategic choke-points.

Maritime superiority for us is a necessity. We must be able in time of emergency to venture in harm's way, controlling air, surface, and subsurface areas to assure access to all the oceans of the world. Failure to do so will leave the credibility of our conventional defense forces in doubt.

We are, as I said, building a 600-ship fleet, including 15 carrier battle groups. But numbers are not the final test. Those ships must be highly capable.

The New Jersey and her sister ships can outgun and outclass any rival platform. This 58,000-ton ship, whose armor alone weighs more than our largest cruiser, is being recommissioned at no more than the cost of a new 4,000-ton frigate. The ``Big J" is being reactivated with the latest in missile electronic warfare and communications technology. She's more than the best means of quickly adding real firepower to our Navy; she's a shining example of how this administration will rebuild America's Armed Forces on budget and on schedule and with the maximum cost-effective application of high technology to existing assets.

The New Jersey's mission is to conduct prompt and sustained operations worldwide, in support of our national interests. In some cases, deployment of the New Jersey will free up our overstressed aircraft carriers for other uses. While the aircraft carrier remains the foundation of American naval power, the battleship will today be the sovereign of the seas. In support of amphibious operations, the New Jersey's 16-inch guns can deliver shells as heavy as an automobile with pinpoint accuracy. And with a speed of 35 knots, the New Jersey will be among the fastest ships afloat.

History tells us that a delegate to the Continental Congress called the creation of our Navy ``the maddest idea in the world." Well, we've been questioned for bringing back this battleship. Yet, I would challenge anyone who's been aboard or even seen the New Jersey to argue its value. It seems odd and a little ironic to me that some of the same critics who accuse us of chasing technology and gold-plating our weapons systems have led the charge against the superbly cost-effective and maintainable New Jersey. I doubt if there's a better example of the cost-consciousness of this administration than the magnificent ship that we're recommissioning today.

However, even with maximum efficiency and an eye toward making every dollar count, we must not fool ourselves. Providing an adequate defense is not cheap. The price of peace is always high, but considering the alternative, it's worth it.

Teddy Roosevelt said it well. "We Americans have many grave problems to solve, many threatening evils to fight, and many deeds to do if, as we hope and believe, we have the wisdom, the strength, the courage and the virtue to do them. But we must face facts as they are. Our nation is that one among all nations of the Earth which holds in its hands the fate of the coming years."

Today, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who worked on the New Jersey. You're a great team, and you did an outstanding job in putting her back into fighting trim. You represent a new spirit, a new sense of responsibility that we must have in all our shipyards and defense-related industries if public support for our vital task is to be maintained.

This ship, as the Secretary told us, was brought in on time and on budget. And from all reports, the craftsmanship and professionalism of those involved in the project were superior, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to extend the thanks of a grateful nation.

The New Jersey, like any ship in our fleet, will depend on the ability, dedication, and, yes, patriotism of you here who are her crew. You're the elite. Six thousand applied for 1,500 crew spaces on the New Jersey. I have no doubt, too, that from among your ranks will come the Spruances and the Halseys and the Thompsons of tomorrow.

A few moments ago I quoted Teddy Roosevelt. Most people remember him as a man of strength and vitality, and, yes, some have an image of a warlike man always spoiling for a fight. Well, let us remember, he won the Nobel Peace Prize, an honor bestowed upon him for his courageous and energetic efforts to end the Russo-Japanese war. He knew the relationship between peace and strength. And he knew the importance of a strong navy.

"The Navy of the United States," he said, "is the right arm of the United States and is emphatically the peacemaker. Woe to our country if we permit that right arm to become palsied or even to become flabby and inefficient."

Well, the New Jersey today becomes our 514th ship and represents our determination to rebuild the strength of America's right arm so that we can preserve the peace.

After valiant service in Vietnam and after saving the lives of countless marines, the New Jersey was decommissioned in 1969. During that solemn ceremony, her last commanding officer, Captain Robert Penniston, spoke prophetically when he suggested that this mighty ship "Rest well, yet sleep lightly, and hear the call, if again sounded, to provide firepower for freedom."

Well, the call has been sounded. America needs the battleship once again to provide firepower for the defense of freedom and, above all, to maintain the peace. She will truly fulfill her mission if her firepower never has to be used.

Captain Fogarty, I hereby place the United States Ship New Jersey in commission.

God bless, and Godspeed.

Note: The President spoke at 1:10 p.m. on the deck of the New Jersey, which was berthed at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. He was introduced by Secretary of the Navy John Lehman.

Following his remarks, the President was given a tour of the ship by Capt. William M. Fogarty, Jr., USN, and then he attended a reception in the captain's quarters. The President then returned to Los Angeles, where he remained overnight.