

Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the British Surrender at Yorktown, Virginia

September 14, 1981

Good morning, and welcome to the White House. Nancy and I and Vice President Bush and Mrs. Bush are delighted that you could all join us here today for the signing of this proclamation and for the opening of the exhibit appropriately called "The Bicentennial Victory at Yorktown." Now, we don't plan to fire any cannons, although we did offer you fife and drum corps. But this little ceremony is our way of, if you will, of kicking off the big celebration that culminates in Yorktown October 19th -- the 200th anniversary date of the American victory there.

Yorktown, of course, represents, as we know, much more than just a military victory. It meant the end of the revolutionary struggle, the beginning of independence, and the gateway to the Constitution. And this triumph pointed the way toward a bright and exciting new future for the rest of the world as well.

So, given the importance of Yorktown, we thought it fitting to invite some special people to be with us today, including the Governors of the Original Thirteen Colonies and the Ambassadors from Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, Canada, Venezuela, Germany, and, of course, our old friend and valued ally, France. Now, I'm not sure that all of them made it, but I believe a good number are here.

Also, I want to be sure and thank all those in the Federal Government and in the many State and local groups and private organizations across the country who contributed so much to bring the Yorktown Bicentennial to fruition. It would be impossible to name you all, but let me at least single out a few. There's the Vice President, of course, Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, and I have to look here because I thought somebody said Jim Watt was going to make it; but I know that he's out on a tour. But his Deputy, Don Hodel, is here, John Marsh, Secretary of the Army, John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy, Verne Orr, the Secretary of the Air Force, John Dalton, the Governor of Virginia, and the Virginia congressional delegation, Bill Fitzgerald, founder of Yorktown International Bicentennial Committee, Lewis McMurrin, the chairman of the Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, and Richard Maeder, the president of the Yorktown Bicentennial Committee.

Now, I hope I haven't gotten confused or mixed up on any of those, but our thanks to all of them for what they've done.

You know, the historian Douglas Southall Freeman wrote something about this famous battle that we should always remember. He said, "Wheresoever men read history, Yorktown symbolized the inspiring truth that resolution works revolution."

The days ahead will be filled with colorful parades and music and fireworks and great fanfare. But amidst all this celebrating, let's not forget Freeman's message, and let's not forget that our Revolution lasted 8 long years and that it was an uphill battle all the way.

Our soldiers faced overwhelming odds. They endured disaster, and right up to the moment of Yorktown their cause seemed hopeless. But these men were no sunshine patriots. It was their bold vision of liberty and their resolve to win it that filled them with courage to endure, and ultimately to prevail.

History tells us that 56 men signed the original Declaration of Independence in '76, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. By the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, some had given their lives, most had given their fortunes, but all had preserved their honor.

We Americans today are not often asked to make such sacrifices. Most never have known the kind of winter that our forefathers suffered through at Valley Forge. Nevertheless, it will take new determination, new resolve, to preserve the treasures of our Revolution.

We live in a precarious world threatened by totalitarian forces who seek to subvert and destroy freedom. The peace we enjoy is maintained only by our strength and resolve, and it's our duty to fortify both.

At home, our enemy is no longer Redcoats but red ink. You figured that I'd get to that, didn't you? [Laughter] You know, this is a little bit like the fellow at the wedding when the minister got to that portion of the ceremony where he said, "If any one can show just cause why these two should not be wed, let him speak now or forever hold his peace." And in the moment of silence that followed, a voice in the back says, "well, if no one wants to say nothing about the bride and groom, I'd like to say a few words about my home State of Texas." [Laughter] I'm going to say it: After 19 deficits in the last 20 years, with a national debt of nearly a trillion dollars, we face a choice of taking drastic action or inviting economic calamity.

Our administration, and I think the American people, have the resolve to do what we know is right and what we know must be done. And make no mistake -- we will. But for those in and out of government so quick to carp and complain, so ready to retreat even before the program has begun, I have just two questions: If not us, then who? And if not now, when?

I believe the spirit of Yorktown, the spirit of our Revolution, is still alive and well in America. I'm confident that if we work together, reason together, and stick together, then just like our forefathers, we'll be all right.

That phrase, "reason together," was a favorite of President Lyndon Johnson. It's from a verse in the Bible that begins: Come, let us reason together. It's probably just as well that he left unspoken the rest of the verse. The next line is: If thou refuse, thou shalt be devoured by the sword. [Laughter]

Now, I'm going to stop talking long enough to sign this proclamation, if you'll just hold for a second.

[At this point, the President signed the proclamation.]

And now we invite you to get in out of the hot Sun and join us in the East Foyer for the official opening of the White House exhibit commemorating the Yorktown Bicentennial. We hope it will be an additional indication to citizens visiting the White House of the historical significance of this event in our nation's birth. So, we shall go and cut the ribbon and see the exhibit.

Thank you all again for being here.

Note: The President spoke at 11 a.m. at the signing ceremony in the First Lady's Garden at the White House.