

Remarks at the Annual Members Banquet of the National Rifle Association in Phoenix, Arizona

May 6, 1983

President Gaffney, officers, Members of the Congress, honored guests -- may I add with pride and pleasure -- my fellow members of the National Rifle Association:

I'm delighted to be here in Phoenix in this great, good neighbor State of Arizona, and I'm delighted to be with all of you. It does my spirit good to be with people who never lose faith in America, who never stop believing in her future, and who never back down one inch from defending the constitutional freedoms that are every American's birthright.

And while I was thanking all of you for a warm welcome, I understand that in another room, unable to fit into this one, are about a thousand more people that are watching through closed-circuit television. And I welcome them and thank them for being present. And it's wonderful also to know that I'm on daytime TV and not the late, late show. [Laughter]

Before I get into my remarks, I would like to pause a moment and report to you on some very good news from another part of world that I've just received.

For the past 2 months, I and others in our administration have been closely involved in negotiations in the Middle East. And this morning I had the pleasure of speaking with Secretary Shultz, who is there in the Middle East, Defense Minister Moshe Arens of Israel, and then I talked to Prime Minister Begin. And they reported to me on the decision of the Israeli Cabinet to accept in principle the agreement worked out by Secretary Shultz for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon.

This agreement is a step forward. It can lead to the restoration of Lebanon's sovereignty throughout its territory while also ensuring that southern Lebanon will not again become a base for hostile actions against Israel. Through diligent and patient diplomacy, we're proving once again that direct negotiations are the best path to peace between Israel and her neighbors. I'm sure that all those who seek peace and stability in Lebanon will welcome this decision by the Israeli Cabinet and will join us in seeking wider support.

At times the challenge of resolving the problems of the Middle East and the world may seem long and difficult, but the alternative is chaos, conflict, and more humane suffering -- human suffering, I should say. The United States is committed to peaceful progress. Ours is the way of reason and negotiation, and we will never swerve from that path.

I want to salute Prime Minister Begin and the Israeli Cabinet today, just as I salute President Gemayel and the leadership of Lebanon. And may I add a word or two on behalf of Secretary George Shultz and our Ambassador Phil Habib, whose tireless efforts and dedication to reason have done so much to make this possible. Today we have crossed an important threshold on the path to peace.

And, now, back to business. And what an honor to be together on the 112th annual meeting of this great organization. As a matter of fact, I'm honored to belong to any organization that's been around longer than I have. [Laughter]

Not too long ago, I had a very memorable visit from your officials. They walked into the Oval Office with some members of the "F" troop of the Texas army. Now, when I saw how those fellows were dressed, and what they were packing, I didn't know whether to stretch out my hand, or make a run for it through the Rose Garden. [Laughter] Well, it turned out they wanted to induct me into the Texas army and to give me a beautiful, hand-crafted flintlock rifle. And I thank you for taking such good care of it, because it's in your museum now.

Being a part of this group, you know that good organizations don't just happen. They take root in a body of shared beliefs. They grow strong from leadership with vision, initiative, and determination to reach great goals. And what you've accomplished speaks for itself -- more than 2 1/2 million members, and NRA's getting stronger every day.

May I just say that we have great respect for your fine, effective leaders in Washington -- Harlan Carter, Warren Cassidy, and your Institute for Legislative Action. We saw proof of NRA's strength a few months ago. Some of you share a special blessing with me -- you're Californians. And you shocked California last November when you mobilized to send help and to down Proposition 15 and defeat it. You pointed out that police would be so busy arresting handgun owners that they would be unable to protect the people against criminals.

It's a nasty truth, but those who seek to inflict harm are not fazed by gun control laws. I happen to know this from personal experience.

You know, I've always felt a special bond with the members of your group. You live by Lincoln's words, "Important principles may and must be inflexible." Your philosophy put its trust in people. So, you insist on individuals being held responsible for their actions. The NRA believes that America's laws were made to be obeyed and that our constitutional liberties are just as important today as 200 years ago.

And by the way, the Constitution does not say that government shall decree the right to keep and bear arms. The Constitution says ". . . the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." [Applause] Thank you very much. I wish I'd saved that and said it last. [Laughter]

But I believe we share the same goal, a strong America, carrying the banner of freedom and secure from threats to our domestic tranquility, economic well-being, and national security.

No group does more to promote gun safety and respect for the laws of this land than the NRA, and I thank you. Still, we've both heard the charge that supporting gun-owners rights encourages a violent, shoot-em-up society. But just a minute. Don't they understand that most violent crimes are not committed by decent, law-abiding citizens? They're committed by career criminals. Guns don't make criminals. Hard-core criminals use guns. And locking them up, the hard-core criminals up, and throwing away the key is the best gun-control law we could ever have.

When I was Governor of California, we dealt with gun control -- we added 5 to 15 years to the sentence of any criminal who, while committing a crime, had a gun in his possession, whether he used that gun or not. Now, I'm even more convinced than ever that this is the right approach if they're going to talk about something to do with guns and crime.

I've said many times that our administration didn't come to Washington to continue business as usual. Either we make fundamental reforms that change things for the better, or we aren't doing our job. We think it's time for our loved ones to walk the streets of America without being afraid.

So, we have declared war on organized crime and the career criminal element in America. More than a hundred prosecutors' offices are working with special teams around the country to throw the book at career criminals in court. And we're determined to cripple the drug-pushers who are poisoning the minds and bodies of our children. We want mandatory sentences. We want firm and speedy application of penalties. And we want to abolish parole for Federal offenses. But there's one thing we do not want: We will never disarm any American who seeks to protect his or her family from fear and harm.

You know, I have to interject something I hadn't planned to say here -- but having mentioned being the Governor of California, during a time when they were talking gun control there in our State, I received a letter, a most unusual letter, from a convicted burglar serving time in San Quentin Prison. And he wrote and told me that he just thought from his vantage point, where he was, he'd like to tell me how happy it would make all of them if we would adopt gun control. And then he explained the inside of his profession. He said, "We can case a place, a home. We can watch and learn the habits of the people that live there when they're in and out and all of that. But," he said, "the one thing that always sticks in our mind that we can never answer is, is that one of those homes where the fellow has a gun in a drawer by the bed?" And he said that, "That's the one that scares us most of all. So," he said, "there'd be a lot of smiles in this place if you would adopt gun control."

We are making headway in our crackdown on crime. A recent U.S. News and World Report story said that "It may be no accident that the first dip in U.S. crime totals in 5 years coincides with a nationwide crackdown on career criminals." Well, serious reported crime dropped by 4 percent in 1982, after rising more than 21 percent since 1977 and 254 percent since 1962.

Longer prison sentences and tougher treatment are beginning to pay dividends. And make no mistake: This is happening because you, the people, are fed up with crime. You're the ones who are organizing neighborhood patrols, supporting your local police, insisting that justice be carried out -- and every time you do that, you keep the spirit of democracy strong in America.

This morning I had the pleasure of meeting Arizona's Sun City Posse, a group which has had great success roping in the bad guys. They're not a posse in the old-time sense, just individuals who patrol their neighborhoods in their cars, wearing hard hats and carrying whistles and flashlights.

May 15th marks the beginning of National Police Week. I urge you and every citizen to let our men and women in blue across America know we stand with them this week and every week of

the year. Another way NRA can help police is to support our efforts for a minimum mandatory term of 57 years imprisonment--and perhaps there'll be some disagreement in this, but I have to say it: for the use of armor-piercing bullets during a Federal crime of violence. These are designed to truly be a threat to law enforcement officers who, so many times, have to depend on bulletproof vests.

We can't solve the problems overnight. But since we established our Florida task force against drugs, drug-related arrests have risen sharply. Just last week, our agents trailed, and then landed behind a suspicious plane near LaBelle, Florida. Two drug smugglers jumped out of the plane and ran away. One of them swam across a canal and hid in the bushes. The alligators didn't get him, but our enforcement people did. They seized 625 pounds of cocaine valued at \$187\1/2\ million.

And let me interject something here. I'm not one who often feels or too often vents anger, but I want the American people to know that they're faced with the most sinister, despicable actions. We have strong evidence that high-level Cuban Government officials have been involved in smuggling drugs into the United States. Attorney General Smith and FBI Director Webster have assured me that they will use every resource they have to combat this menace. And as we crack down on criminals, we're trying to move forward on another front: to reform the firearms laws which needlessly interfere with the rights of legitimate gun owners like yourselves.

We're working closely with your leadership and congressional sponsors of firearms legislation, such as Senators McClure and Hatch and Congressman Volkmer. I look forward to signing a bill that truly protects the rights of law-abiding citizens, without diminishing the effectiveness of criminal law enforcement against the misuse of firearms.

Your leadership's support has been important to us. Just last year, I signed two amendments into law. One eliminated unnecessary recordkeeping requirements on 22-caliber rimfire ammunition. The other saved many custom gunsmiths from financial ruin.

And I want you to know that I'm in favor of the Civilian Marksmanship program. I support this idea because clear back to the Revolutionary War, one of the great talents of American soldiers has been their marksmanship. And it turned out they developed this shooting at targets and plinking as young boys. So, I'm asking Secretary Weinberger to study ways in which the marksmanship program can be improved.

I'm also happy to report that since I took office the sale of M - 1 rifles to participants and instructors in high-power rifle marksmanship training programs has been increased significantly. And I have asked the Department of Defense to look at ways in which sales might be increased even further.

May I say a few words about conservation and the group I consider the foremost conservationists of our wildlife resources -- America's sportsmen, hunters, and fishermen. As Teddy Roosevelt recognized, ``The free, self-reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged . . . democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures -- all these unite to give to the career of the . . . hunter its peculiar charm."''

Well, unfortunately, there's been a kind of elitist attitude in Washington that vast natural resource areas must be locked up to save the planet from mankind. Well, we have a different philosophy, one based on respect for both man and nature. Our administration believes in the concept of stewardship, caring for the resources we have for the benefit of mankind.

Now, let me be clear about those words -- "stewardship for the benefit of mankind." We favor economic development, but not within our national parks or within our wilderness areas. We have not and never will propose that. What we do say is when the last administration arbitrarily closed tens of millions of acres of Alaskan land, telling sports hunters to stay out, then, yes, we think that was wrong, and we're trying to correct it.

We're trying to correct something else, too. A 1980 General Accounting Office report warned of health and safety hazards in our national parks. During the previous administration, the National Park Service budget for restoration and improvement had been cut. Now, I don't usually brag about spending money; but we have doubled it. We have the active support of NRA. We've also addressed one of America's most neglected and serious environmental problems, the destruction of our wetlands.

Our national parks, national wildlife refuges and coastal barriers, wetlands, national forests, and public lands are better managed today than they were just a few years ago. And I think that story merits more attention than it's received.

Another point which should be better understood: The backbone of our conservation efforts begins with American sportsmen. For over 40 years, hunters have been paying a special excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition through the Pittman-Robertson Act, nearly \$1.2 billion since 1939. State wildlife managers have used these funds to preserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats. Such wild creatures as the whitetail deer, the ruffed grouse, wild turkey and pronghorn antelope, which were threatened with extinction in many areas have been brought back, in some cases, to great abundance.

This past year alone, American hunters have paid more than \$107 million toward these conservation efforts. The money will fund important studies of game and their habitat. It'll provide food and habitat projects for wildlife. And portions will go for hunter safety and education courses where our youngsters will be taught marksmanship, firearms safety, and some of the values and ethics of hunting and the outdoors. I deeply appreciate your contributions to preserving our national treasures for the benefit of our people and future generations.

This idea of stewardship, of preserving and caring for what we have, bringing our economy back to health so you, the people, can make us great again, that's a crucial part of keeping America free and making her secure. Now, I know that the road to recovery has been long and hard. Too many people are still out of work. But I believe with all my heart that we have turned the corner. We are on our way back. And like that fighter, Rocky Balboa, America is getting stronger now.

You know, when I see inflation down, interest rates down, tax rates being cut, industrial production and productivity up, housing starts and auto sales up, and workers being called back, 250,000 more people put to work last month -- now that our program is doing what we said it

would, I have to ask of our critics, how come they're not calling it Reaganomics anymore?
[Laughter]

Yes, some critics say nothing is right. They oppose budget savings, and they oppose tax cuts. Despite the calamity they created, they continue to resist reform. Their attitude reminds me of a comment a great American made about a similar situation. "Those who are frightened," he said, "by boldness and cowed by the necessity for making decisions complain that all we have done is unnecessary and subject to great risks. Now that these people are coming out of their storm cellars, they forget that there ever was a storm." Well, now those words were spoken by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1934.

Well, I haven't forgotten the storm that was raging around every family in 1980. With all due respect, may I remind our critics: Those who saddled this nation with double-digit inflation, 21 1/2 percent interest rates -- the highest in more than a hundred years -- the worst tax burden in our peacetime history, are the last people who should be giving sermons on fairness and compassion.

If inflation had continued as it was when they were in office, a family of four on a fixed income of \$20,000 would be more than \$1,500 poorer in purchasing power today. If their tax increases had stayed on the books, and our tax cuts hadn't been passed, a median-income family of four would be paying \$700 more in Federal income taxes this year. If this is the liberal idea of fairness and compassion, may the good Lord be with you if they ever have their way.

President John F. Kennedy said in 1963, ". . . the largest single barrier to full employment . . . and to a higher rate of economic growth is the . . . heavy drag of Federal income taxes on private purchasing power, initiative, and incentive." Those wise words are just as true today. I will veto any attempt to tamper with the third year of our tax cut, or the indexing provision.

And the other day I had a very exciting experience when a Member of the Senate and a Member of the House walked into my office, each presented me a letter; each letter signed by enough men in the House -- men and women in the House and enough Senators to guarantee the upholding of any vetoes that I might take with regard to the taxing matters.

Indexing is the best security middle-income families have against bracket creep -- inflation pushing you into higher and higher tax brackets when you get cost-of-living pay raises and so forth. Those who would strip you of this protection are tax-grabbers, pure and simple.

The United States didn't run up a trillion-dollar debt because you aren't taxed enough. We've got that debt because government spends too much. We need spending restraint, not tax increases. I want to work with the Congress, but not at your expense and not at the risk of sabotaging this recovery that we worked so hard to achieve.

Nor must we gamble, ever again, with the security of this country by neglecting our defense readiness. The day I took office, our Armed Forces were in a shocking state of neglect. I was surprised even though I thought I'd known something about it. We had shortages of skilled manpower, faulty equipment, lack of spare parts, and insufficient fuel and ammunition for proper

training. We had planes that couldn't fly for lack of spare parts, ships that couldn't leave port, and helicopters that couldn't stay aloft.

I believe it's immoral to ask the sons and daughters of America to protect this land with second-rate equipment and bargain-basement weapons. If they can put their lives on the line to protect our way of life, then, by golly, we can give them the weapons, the training, and the money they need to do the job right. And when it comes to keeping America safe and strong, when it comes to keeping America free, there should be no Republicans or Democrats, only patriotic Americans working together.

We've begun to pay our military personnel a decent wage. We've increased pilot flying time, extended basic training inventories. The level and quality of recruits are up sharply with the highest levels they've ever been. By providing adequate compensation for our soldiers, by giving them the tools they need to do their jobs, we're restoring dignity, honor, and pride to the uniform of the United States military, and we must not -- we dare not -- sacrifice that.

The people who disagree with our side rebuilding its military security don't seem to understand: Our side is the only side where people are permitted to disagree -- and that should make them nervous. It isn't America that attacks and occupies other countries; we conduct no worldwide campaign of subversion and terrorism; we don't have to build walls to keep our people in, or use armies of secret police and gulag prison camps to keep them quiet. We're a free people, a democratic people; we believe in God and we love peace. But let us remember what George Washington warned in 1790 -- that to be prepared for war is one of the best means of preserving the peace.

There's nothing I want more than a verifiable agreement with the Soviet Union to reduce the levels of strategic weapons. In the long run, that's the best way to lower the growth in defense spending. But the Soviets will only bargain in good faith if they understand we're determined to defend freedom. And I'm determined that they will understand that.

Now, 9 days ago, I addressed the Congress on the subject of Central America, where the United States has fundamental and far-reaching interests. We must never forget that two-thirds of all our foreign trade and petroleum pass through the sea-lanes of that region. Nor can we forget that a country like El Salvador is approximately 10 miles closer to Phoenix, Arizona, than Phoenix is to Washington, D.C.

The people of El Salvador are not perfect. They're made mistakes as we have made mistakes. But they're trying, with great bravery and against tremendous odds, to build the dream of a society like ours. They understand that government must depend and rest on the consent of the governed; that only when people are free to worship, create, and build, only when they are given a personal stake in deciding their destiny, and benefiting from their own risks -- only then will their society become dynamic, prosperous, progressive, and free.

But El Salvador is under attack. Guerrillas with contempt for democracy and armed to the teeth by Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviets are determined to shoot their way into power. We have

asked the Congress for a modest package of assistance for the region, with three times as much economic aid as military aid.

But military aid is essential, because the guerrillas are deliberately destroying El Salvador's economy -- blowing up bridges, railroads, water facilities, telephone, and electrical systems. These are not the actions of a people who love the common man and who seek to reform their system. They're the actions of thugs who trample the common man in their quest for total power.

America faces a choice: Will we give El Salvador her chance to walk beside us in the sunlight of democracy, or will we turn our backs on a friend, letting her slide into a dark night of tyranny, rationalizing our inaction with detached lectures on morality.

Running away from this clear-cut responsibility would reward aggression and bring dishonor on the good name of the United States. It would swell the tide of political and economic instability in Central America, creating a new army of refugees, and bringing danger closer and closer to home.

I appeal to you today: Tell your representatives they cannot remain indifferent to another Communist takeover on our doorstep.

Standing up for America also means standing up for the God who has so blessed this land. If we could just keep remembering that Moses brought down from the mountain 10 Commandments, not 10 suggestions -- [laughter] -- and if those of us who live for the Lord could remember that He wants us to love our Lord and our neighbor, then there's no limit to the problems we could solve or the mountains we could climb together as a mighty force for good.

The United States remains the last, best hope for a mankind plagued by tyranny and deprivation. America is no stronger than its people -- and that means you and me. Well, I believe in you, and I believe that if we work together, then one day we will say, "We fought the good fight. We finished the race. We kept the faith." And to our children and our children's children we can say, "We did all that could be done in the brief time that was given us here on Earth."

Thank you all, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 1:02 p.m. at the Phoenix Civic Plaza.

Following his appearance at the luncheon, the President traveled to California and Rancho del Cielo, his ranch near Santa Barbara.