

Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College, Eureka, Illinois

May 9, 1982

President Gilbert, trustees, administration and faculty, students, and the friends of Eureka College, and particularly those whose day this is, the graduating class of '82:

Dan, you said the 25th and now the 50th. Do you mind if I try for the 75th?[The President was commemorating the 50th anniversary of his graduation from Eureka College.]

But it goes without saying that this is a very special day for you who are graduating. Would you forgive me if I say it's a very special day for me also? Over the years since I sat where you, the graduating class of 1982, are now sitting, I've returned to the campus many times, always with great pleasure and warm nostalgia. Now, it just isn't true that I only came back this time to clean out my gym locker. [Laughter]

On one of those occasions, as you've been told, I addressed a graduating class here, "'neath the elms," and was awarded an honorary degree. And at that time I informed those assembled that while I was grateful for the honor, it added to a feeling of guilt I'd been nursing for 25 years, because I always figured the first degree they gave me was honorary. [Laughter]

Now, if it's true that tradition is the glue holding civilization together, then Eureka has made its contribution to that effort. Yes, it is a small college in a small community. It's no impersonal, assembly-line diploma mill. As the years pass, if you have let yourselves absorb the spirit and tradition of this place, you'll find the 4 years you've spent here living in your memory as a rich and important part of your life.

Oh, you'll have some regrets along with the happy memories. I let football and other extracurricular activities eat into my study time with the result that my grade average was closer to the C level required for eligibility than it was to straight A's. And even now I wonder what I might have accomplished if I'd studied harder. [Laughter]

Now, I know there are differences between the Eureka College of 1932 and the Eureka of 1982, but I'm also sure that in many ways -- important ways -- Eureka remains the same. For one thing, it's impossible for you now to believe what I've said about things being the same. We who preceded you understand that very well, because when we were here, we thought old grads who came back only after 5 years -- not 50 -- couldn't understand what our life was like and what had taken place and changed. So, take my word for it. As the years go by, you'll be amazed at how fresh the memory of these years will remain in your minds, how easily you can relive the very emotions that you experienced.

The Class of '32 has no yearbook to record our final days on the campus. The Class of '33 didn't put out a Prism because of the hardships of that Great Depression era. The faculty sometimes went for months on end without pay. And yet this school made it possible for young men and

women, myself included, to get an education even though we were totally without funds, our families destitute victims of the Depression. Yes, this place is deep in my heart. Everything that has been good in my life began here.

Graduation Day is called "Commencement," and properly so, because it is both a recognition of completion and a beginning. And I would like, seriously, to talk to you about this new phase -- the society in which you're now going to take your place as full-time participants. You're no longer observers. You'll be called upon to make decisions and express your views on global events, because those events will affect your lives.

I've spoken of similarities, and the 1980's like the 1930's may be one of those -- a crucial juncture in history that will determine the direction of the future.

In about a month I will meet in Europe with the leaders of nations who are our closest friends and allies. At Versailles, leaders of the industrial powers of the world will seek better ways to meet today's economic challenges. In Bonn, I will join my colleagues from the Atlantic Alliance nations to renew those ties which have been the foundation of Western, free-world defense for 37 years. There will also be meetings in Rome and London.

Now, these meetings are significant for a simple but very important reason: Our own nation's fate is directly linked to that of our sister democracies in Western Europe. The values for which America and all democratic nations stand represent the culmination of Western culture. Andrei Sakharov, the distinguished Nobel Laureate and courageous Soviet human rights advocate, has written in a message smuggled to freedom, "I believe in Western man. I have faith in his mind which is practical and efficient and, at the same time, aspires to great goals. I have faith in his good intentions and in his decisiveness."

This glorious tradition requires a partnership to preserve and protect it. Only as partners can we hope to achieve the goal of a peaceful community of nations. Only as partners can we defend the values of democracy and human dignity that we hold so dear.

There's a single, major issue in our partnership which will underlie the discussions that I will have with the European leaders: the future of Western relations with the Soviet Union. How should we deal with the Soviet Union in the years ahead? What framework should guide our conduct and our policies toward it? And what can we realistically expect from a world power of such deep fears, hostilities, and external ambitions?

I believe the unity of the West is the foundation for any successful relationship with the East. Without Western unity, we'll squander our energies in bickering while the Soviets continue as they please. With unity, we have the strength to moderate Soviet behavior. We've done so in the past, and we can do so again.

Our challenge is to establish a framework in which sound East-West relations will endure. I'm optimistic that we can build a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union. To do so, however, we must understand the nature of the Soviet system and the lessons of the past.

The Soviet Union is a huge empire ruled by an elite that holds all power and all privilege, and they hold it tightly because, as we've seen in Poland, they fear what might happen if even the smallest amount of control slips from their grasp. They fear the infectiousness of even a little freedom, and because of this in many ways their system has failed. The Soviet empire is faltering because it is rigid -- centralized control has destroyed incentives for innovation, efficiency, and individual achievement. Spiritually, there is a sense of malaise and resentment.

But in the midst of social and economic problems, the Soviet dictatorship has forged the largest armed force in the world. It has done so by preempting the human needs of its people, and, in the end, this course will undermine the foundations of the Soviet system. Harry Truman was right when he said of the Soviets that, "When you try to conquer other people or extend yourself over vast areas you cannot win in the long run."

Yet Soviet aggressiveness has grown as Soviet military power has increased. To compensate, we must learn from the lessons of the past. When the West has stood unified and firm, the Soviet Union has taken heed. For 35 years Western Europe has lived free despite the shadow of Soviet military might. Through unity, you'll remember from your modern history courses, the West secured the withdrawal of occupation forces from Austria and the recognition of its rights in Berlin.

Other Western policies have not been successful. East-West trade was expanded in hope of providing incentives for Soviet restraint, but the Soviets exploited the benefits of trade without moderating their behavior. Despite a decade of ambitious arms control efforts, the Soviet buildup continues. And despite its signature of the Helsinki agreements on human rights, the Soviet Union has not relaxed its hold on its own people or those of Western [Eastern] Europe.

During the 1970's, some of us forgot the warning of President Kennedy, who said that the Soviets "have offered to trade us an apple for an orchard. We don't do that in this country." But we came perilously close to doing just that.

If East-West relations in the detente era in Europe have yielded disappointment, detente outside of Europe has yielded a severe disillusionment for those who expected a moderation of Soviet behavior. The Soviet Union continues to support Vietnam in its occupation of Kampuchea and its massive military presence in Laos. It is engaged in a war of aggression against Afghanistan. Soviet proxy forces have brought instability and conflict to Africa and Central America.

We are now approaching an extremely important phase in East-West relations as the current Soviet leadership is succeeded by a new generation. Both the current and the new Soviet leadership should realize aggressive policies will meet a firm Western response. On the other hand, a Soviet leadership devoted to improving its people's lives, rather than expanding its armed conquests, will find a sympathetic partner in the West. The West will respond with expanded trade and other forms of cooperation. But all of this depends on Soviet actions. Standing in the Athenian marketplace 2,000 years ago, Demosthenes said, "What sane man would let another man's words rather than his deeds proclaim who is at peace and who is at war with him?"

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means. I believe we can cope. I believe that the West can fashion a realistic, durable policy that will protect our interests and keep the peace, not just for this generation but for your children and your grandchildren.

I believe such a policy consists of five points: military balance, economic security, regional stability, arms reductions, and dialog. Now, these are the means by which we can seek peace with the Soviet Union in the years ahead. Today, I want to set this five-point program to guide the future of our East-West relations, set it out for all to hear and see.

First, a sound East-West military balance is absolutely essential. Last week NATO published a comprehensive comparison of its forces with those of the Warsaw Pact. Its message is clear: During the past decade, the Soviet Union has built up its forces across the board. During that same period, the defense expenditures of the United States declined in real terms. The United States has already undertaken steps to recover from that decade of neglect. And I should add that the expenditures of our European allies have increased slowly but steadily, something we often fail to recognize here at home.

The second point on which we must reach consensus with our allies deals with economic security. Consultations are under way among Western nations on the transfer of militarily significant technology and the extension of financial credits to the East, as well as on the question of energy dependence on the East, that energy dependence of Europe. We recognize that some of our allies' economic requirements are distinct from our own. But the Soviets must not have access to Western technology with military applications, and we must not subsidize the Soviet economy. The Soviet Union must make the difficult choices brought on by its military budgets and economic shortcomings.

The third element is regional stability with peaceful change. Last year, in a speech in Philadelphia and in the summit meetings at Cancun, I outlined the basic American plan to assist the developing world. These principles for economic development remain the foundation of our approach. They represent no threat to the Soviet Union. Yet in many areas of the developing world we find that Soviet arms and Soviet-supported troops are attempting to destabilize societies and extend Moscow's influence.

High on our agenda must be progress toward peace in Afghanistan. The United States is prepared to engage in a serious effort to negotiate an end to the conflict caused by the Soviet invasion of that country. We are ready to cooperate in an international effort to resolve this problem, to secure a full Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and to ensure self-determination for the Afghan people.

In southern Africa, working closely with our Western allies and the African States, we've made real progress toward independence for Namibia. These negotiations, if successful, will result in peaceful and secure conditions throughout southern Africa. The simultaneous withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola is essential to achieving Namibian independence, as well as creating long-range prospects for peace in the region.

Central America also has become a dangerous point of tension in East-West relations. The Soviet Union cannot escape responsibility for the violence and suffering in the region caused by accelerated transfer of advanced military equipment to Cuba.

However, it was in Western Europe -- or Eastern Europe, I should say, that the hopes of the 1970's were greatest, and it's there that they have been the most bitterly disappointed. There was hope that the people of Poland could develop a freer society. But the Soviet Union has refused to allow the people of Poland to decide their own fate, just as it refused to allow the people of Hungary to decide theirs in 1956, or the people of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

If martial law in Poland is lifted, if all the political prisoners are released, and if a dialog is restored with the Solidarity Union, the United States is prepared to join in a program of economic support. Water cannons and clubs against the Polish people are hardly the kind of dialog that gives us hope. It's up to the Soviets and their client regimes to show good faith by concrete actions.

The fourth point is arms reduction. I know that this weighs heavily on many of your minds. In our 1931 Prism, we quoted Carl Sandburg, who in his own beautiful way quoted the Mother Prairie, saying, "Have you seen a red sunset drip over one of my cornfields, the shore of night stars, the wave lines of dawn up a wheat valley?" What an idyllic scene that paints in our minds - - and what a nightmarish prospect that a huge mushroom cloud might someday destroy such beauty. My duty as President is to ensure that the ultimate nightmare never occurs, that the prairies and the cities and the people who inhabit them remain free and untouched by nuclear conflict.

I wish more than anything there were a simple policy that would eliminate that nuclear danger. But there are only difficult policy choices through which we can achieve a stable nuclear balance at the lowest possible level.

I do not doubt that the Soviet people, and, yes, the Soviet leaders have an overriding interest in preventing the use of nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union within the memory of its leaders has known the devastation of total conventional war and knows that nuclear war would be even more calamitous. And yet, so far, the Soviet Union has used arms control negotiations primarily as an instrument to restrict U.S. defense programs and, in conjunction with their own arms buildup, a means to enhance Soviet power and prestige.

Unfortunately, for some time suspicions have grown that the Soviet Union has not been living up to its obligations under existing arms control treaties. There is conclusive evidence the Soviet Union has provided toxins to the Laotians and Vietnamese for use against defenseless villagers in Southeast Asia. And the Soviets themselves are employing chemical weapons on the freedom-fighters in Afghanistan.

We must establish firm criteria for arms control in the 1980's if we're to secure genuine and lasting restraint on Soviet military programs throughout arms control. We must seek agreements which are verifiable, equitable, and militarily significant. Agreements that provide only the appearance of arms control breed dangerous illusions.

Last November, I committed the United States to seek significant reductions on nuclear and conventional forces. In Geneva, we have since proposed limits on U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range missiles, including the complete elimination of the most threatening systems on both sides. In Vienna, we're negotiating, together with our allies, for reductions of conventional forces in Europe. In the 40-nation Committee on Disarmament, the United Nations [United States] seeks a total ban on all chemical weapons.

Since the first days of my administration, we've been working on our approach to the crucial issue of strategic arms and the control and negotiations for control of those arms with the Soviet Union. The study and analysis required has been complex and difficult. It had to be undertaken deliberately, thoroughly, and correctly. We've laid a solid basis for these negotiations. We're consulting with congressional leaders and with our allies, and we are now ready to proceed.

The main threat to peace posed by nuclear weapons today is the growing instability of the nuclear balance. This is due to the increasingly destructive potential of the massive Soviet buildup in its ballistic missile force.

Therefore, our goal is to enhance deterrence and achieve stability through significant reductions in the most destabilizing nuclear systems, ballistic missiles, and especially the giant intercontinental ballistic missiles, while maintaining a nuclear capability sufficient to deter conflict, to underwrite our national security, and to meet our commitment to allies and friends.

For the immediate future, I'm asking my START -- and START really means -- we've given up on SALT -- START means "Strategic Arms Reduction Talks," and that negotiating team to propose to their Soviet counterparts a practical, phased reduction plan. The focus of our efforts will be to reduce significantly the most destabilizing systems, the ballistic missiles, the number of warheads they carry, and their overall destructive potential.

At the first phase, or the end of the first phase of START, I expect ballistic missile warheads, the most serious threat we face, to be reduced to equal levels, equal ceilings, at least a third below the current levels. To enhance stability, I would ask that no more than half of those warheads be land-based. I hope that these warhead reductions, as well as significant reductions in missiles themselves, could be achieved as rapidly as possible.

In a second phase, we'll seek to achieve an equal ceiling on other elements of our strategic nuclear forces, including limits on the ballistic missile throw-weight at less than current American levels. In both phases, we shall insist on verification procedures to ensure compliance with the agreement.

This, I might say, will be the twentieth time that we have sought such negotiations with the Soviet Union since World War II. The monumental task of reducing and reshaping our strategic forces to enhance stability will take many years of concentrated effort. But I believe that it will be possible to reduce the risks of war by removing the instabilities that now exist and by dismantling the nuclear menace.

I have written to President Brezhnev and directed Secretary Haig to approach the Soviet Government concerning the initiation of formal negotiations on the reduction of strategic nuclear arms, START, at the earliest opportunity. We hope negotiations will begin by the end of June.

We will negotiate seriously, in good faith, and carefully consider all proposals made by the Soviet Union. If they approach these negotiations in the same spirit, I'm confident that together we can achieve an agreement of enduring value that reduces the number of nuclear weapons, halts the growth in strategic forces, and opens the way to even more far-reaching steps in the future.

I hope the Commencement today will also mark the commencement of a new era, in both senses of the word, a new start toward a more peaceful and secure world.

The fifth and final point I propose for East-West relations is dialog. I've always believed that people's problems can be solved when people talk to each other instead of about each other. And I've already expressed my own desire to meet with President Brezhnev in New York next month. If this can't be done, I'd hope we could arrange a future meeting where positive results can be anticipated. And when we sit down, I'll tell President Brezhnev that the United States is ready to build a new understanding based upon the principles I've outlined today.

I'll tell him that his government and his people have nothing to fear from the United States. The free nations living at peace in the world community can vouch for the fact that we seek only harmony. And I'll ask President Brezhnev why our two nations can't practice mutual restraint. Why can't our peoples enjoy the benefits that would flow from real cooperation? Why can't we reduce the number of horrendous weapons?

Perhaps I should also speak to him of this school and these graduates who are leaving it today -- of your hopes for the future, of your deep desire for peace, and yet your strong commitment to defend your values if threatened. Perhaps if he someday could attend such a ceremony as this, he'd better understand America. In the only system he knows, you would be here by the decision of government, and on this day the government representatives would be here telling most, if not all, of you where you were going to report to work tomorrow.

But as we go to Europe for the talks and as we proceed in the important challenges facing this country, I want you to know that I will be thinking of you and of Eureka and what you represent. In one of my yearbooks, I remember reading that, "The work of the prairie is to be the soil for the growth of a strong Western culture." I believe Eureka is fulfilling that work. You, the members of the 1982 graduating class, are this year's harvest.

I spoke of the difference between our two countries. I try to follow the humor of the Russian people. We don't hear much about the Russian people. We hear about the Russian leaders. But you can learn a lot, because they do have a sense of humor, and you can learn from the jokes they're telling. And one of the most recent jokes I found kind of, well, personally interesting. Maybe you might -- tell you something about your country.

The joke they tell is that an American and a Russian were arguing about the differences between our two countries. And the American said, "Look, in my country I can walk into the Oval Office; I can hit the desk with my fist and say, 'President Reagan, I don't like the way you're governing the United States.'" And the Russian said, "I can do that." The American said, "What?" He says, "I can walk into the Kremlin, into Brezhnev's office. I can pound Brezhnev's desk, and I can say, 'Mr. President, I don't like the way Ronald Reagan is governing the United States.'" [Laughter]

Eureka as an institution and you as individuals are sustaining the best of Western man's ideals. As a fellow graduate and in the office I hold, I'll do my best to uphold these same ideals.

To the Class of '82, congratulations, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 3:23 p.m. in the Reagan Physical Education Center. He was introduced by Daniel Gilbert, president of Eureka College.