

THE CITADEL

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ADDRESS BY RONALD WILSON REAGAN,
40TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
AT THE 1993 COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES OF THE CITADEL

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REMARKS BY PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN AT THE CITADEL

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

SATURDAY, MAY 15, 1993

I'm delighted to be here on this glorious day of hope and promise. It is indeed an honor to have the privilege of speaking to you today and to receive an honorary degree from this distinguished institution.

Surely my service record alone can't explain my presence here. More than half a century ago I was made a 2nd Lieutenant in the Horse Cavalry Reserve. That's hardly enough to warrant the honor you do me today.

But I do have to confess to you that during my presidency, I had an idea that I could never get anyone to support -- I wanted to reinstate the Horse Cavalry in the armed services.

Frankly, my being here cannot be based on my academic achievements either. Yes it's true that my alma mater -- Eureka College -- awarded me an honorary degree 25 years after my graduation. That only aggravated a sense of guilt I'd nursed for 25 years. I've always suspected the first degree they'd given me was honorary. Truthfully, I am very proud to receive this degree today and my prayer is that I can somehow be deserving of it.

It is a special pleasure to address the graduating class of 1993, as together we mark the culmination of The Citadel's sesquicentennial year. My goodness -- one hundred and fifty years. Has it really been that long? It seems like only yesterday that Colonel Harvey Dick and I were watching the first 20 members of the Corps of Cadets report for duty.

You know, the military college had been created that past December, and we weren't quite sure how things would turn out. I remember asking him, "Colonel Dick, do you think these 'original knobs' will make the grade?" Well, a week later, ten of them were serving "confinements"; the other ten were finishing up "tours"; and all 20 had turned in at least one "E.R.W." You see, some things never change. Come to think of it, I seem to recall the Colonel was even driving the same station wagon around Charleston. The only difference was that back then, that wagon had real horsepower.

Seriously, on my way to Charleston I took a peek at "The Guidon", which they tell me is the "Bible of the Knobs." The more I read that little booklet, the better I like it. For example, I learned the three permissible "knob answers": "Sir, yes sir"; and "Sir, no sir" and -- I liked this third one best of all -- "Sir, no excuse, sir." By golly, I think, we ought to send the entire U.S. Congress down here to learn answer number three.

Then I read this friendly advice in the book: "When you receive an order, carry it out to the best of your ability. Never argue or offer suggestions which you think might be better. This is not in your best interest." Well, it seems to me that The Citadel has a few things to teach the Cabinet and the Executive Branch, too! In fact, maybe we should just put the whole Federal Government through cadet training!

But then I remembered the last time the Corps of Cadets and good people of Charleston decided the Federal Government was taking too active an interest in their affairs. Before you knew it, Cadet George Haynsworth and the other "Boys Behind the Gun" had fired the famous "first shot" at the Yankee steamer "Star of the West." Well, we all know what happened after that.

As I recall, it took a good four years before everything calmed down again. Just think of the "E.R.W." those fellas would have had to write!

In fact, of course, the "Boys Behind the Gun" served valiantly the cause to which they had pledged their devotion. In this, they exemplified a Citadel tradition -- a tradition that would transcend the divisions of our nation's bloodiest internal struggle, and inspire generations of future cadets to courageous service to a nation reunited.

The Citadel's roll of honor today stretches unblemished from the Ardennes to the 38th Parallel, from Grenada to the Persian Gulf, with name after name of those who have served our country bravely in time of war -- names like General Charles Summerall, General Mark Clark, and your current President, General Bud Watts. Yes, countless soldiers have distinguished themselves on fields of valor and are part of the century-and-a-half tradition of duty and honor we celebrate today.

But for me, there is one name that will always come to mind whenever I think of The Citadel and the Corps of Cadets. It is a name that appears in no military histories; its owner won no glory on the field of battle.

No, his moment of truth came not in combat, but on a snow-driven, peacetime day in the Nation's capital in January of 1982. That is the day that the civilian airliner, on which he was a passenger, crashed into a Washington bridge, then plunged into the rough waters of the icy Potomac. He survived the impact of the crash and found himself with a small group of other survivors struggling to stay afloat in the near-frozen river. And then, suddenly, there was hope: a park police helicopter appeared overhead, trailing a lifeline to the outstretched hands below, a lifeline that could carry but a few of the victims to the safety of the shore. News cameramen, watching helplessly, recorded the scene as the man in the water repeatedly handed the rope to the others, refusing to save himself until the first one, then two, then three and four, and finally five of his fellow passengers had been rescued.

But when the helicopter returned for one final trip, the trip that would rescue the man who had passed the rope, it was too late. He had slipped at last beneath the waves with the sinking wreckage -- the only one of 79 fatalities in the disaster who lost his life after the accident itself.

For months thereafter, we knew him only as the "unknown hero." And then an exhaustive Coast Guard investigation conclusively established his identity. Many of you here today know his name as well as I do, for his portrait now hangs with honor -- as it indeed should -- on this very campus: the campus where he once walked, as you have, through the Summerall Gate and along the Avenue of Remembrance. He was a young first classman with a crisp uniform and a confident stride on a bright spring morning, full of hopes and plans for the future. He never dreamed that his life's supreme challenge would come in its final moments, some 25 years later, adrift in the bone-chilling waters of an ice-strewn river and surrounded by others who desperately needed help.

But when the challenge came, he was ready. His name was Arland D. Williams, Jr., The Citadel Class of 1957. He brought honor to his alma mater, and honor to his nation. I was never more proud as President than on that day in June 1983 when his parents and his children joined me in the Oval Office -- for then I was able, on behalf of the nation, to pay posthumous honor to him. Greater love, as the Bible tells us, hath no man than to lay down his life for a friend.

I have spoken of Arland Williams in part to honor him anew in your presence, here at this special institution that helped mold his character. It is the same institution that has now put its final imprint on you, the graduating seniors of its 150th year. But I have also retold his story because I believe it has something important to teach to you as graduates about the challenges that life inevitably seems to present -- and about what it is that prepares us to meet them.

Sometimes, you see, life gives us what we think is fair warning of the choices that will shape our

future. On such occasions, we are able to look far along the path, up ahead to that distant point in the woods where the poet's "two roads" diverge. And then, if we are wise, we will take time to think and reflect before choosing which road to take before the junction is reached.

But such occasions, in fact, are rather rare -- far rarer, I suspect, than the confident eyes of one's early twenties can quite perceive. Far more often than we can comfortably admit, the most crucial of life's moments come like the scriptural "thief in the night." Suddenly and without notice, the crisis is upon us and the moment of choice is at hand -- a moment fraught with import for ourselves, and for all who are depending on the choice we make. We find ourselves, if you will, plunged without warning into the icy water, where the currents of moral consequence run swift and deep, and where our fellow man -- and yes, I believe our Maker -- are waiting to see whether we will pass the rope.

These are the moments when instinct and character take command, as they took command for Arland Williams on the day our Lord would call him home. For there is no time, at such moments, for anything but fortitude and integrity. Debate and reflection and a leisurely weighing of the alternatives are luxuries we do not have. The only question is what kind of responsibility will come to the fore.

And now we come to the heart of the matter, to the core lesson taught by the heroism of Arland Williams on January 13, 1982. For you see, the character that takes command in moments of crucial choices has already been determined.

It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all the "little" choices of years past -- by all those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation -- whispering the lie that "it really doesn't matter." It has been determined by all the day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy and crises seemed far away -- the decisions that, piece by piece, bit by bit, developed habits of discipline or of laziness; habits of self-sacrifice or of self-indulgence; habits of duty and honor and integrity -- or dishonor and shame.

Because when life does get tough, and the crisis is undeniably at hand -- when we must, in an instant, look inward for strength of character to see us through -- we will find nothing inside ourselves that we have not already put there.

And you know, it turns out that much the same thing is also true for our country. Indeed, I believe this is especially so in the most crucial area of all -- America's ability, when necessary, to defend her citizens and her freedoms and her vital interests by force of arms. For here, too, the crisis is often upon us in an instant. Here, too, our instincts and character must be equal to challenges we can scarcely predict. But here, even character and instinct will not be enough. We must also have the tools -- the military capability -- ready in advance of the crisis that may demand their use.

Yes, it's true that today the world is a different, better place than it was a decade ago, but it is not an entirely safe place. A multitude of terrorists and international hoodlums are working night and day to do us harm. U.S. troops have been called into action over a dozen times in the last four years. And dozens of deadly conflicts still plague the globe, from central Europe to the former Soviet Union to the Middle East.

Yet, our nation is calling the watchman down from the tower. There are some who want to send Paul Revere into retirement. And I fear it is much too early for that.

By the mid-1990's, defense spending will be well under four percent of our economy. That's down to pre-Pearl Harbor levels. Some members of the "blame the military crowd" in Washington want to cut defense even faster -- almost recklessly. They think military weapons and yes, military people, are somehow akin to war mongers.

But just recently we've seen an incredible example of the great humanitarian duties performed by the U.S. armed forces. You don't hear too much about it from that "blame the military crowd" but I think history will record it as one of the great humanitarian projects of our era.

Not too long ago, our forces went into Somalia, a country suffering from daily violence and intense starvation. I'm sure you remember the horrifying pictures on television of the starving children there. Our country made the bold and difficult decision to take the lead in this effort, and our troops were sent because it was the right thing to do. They performed brilliantly and restored order to that desperate country and when the mission was successfully completed, they came home. It was a proud moment for our country and I, for one, commend those young heroes for their valor.

Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana has put it simply and put it well: "The role of the United States should be to lead the world. Our country has the wisdom, the political will, the military capability, and the economic strength to perform that role better than any other." I would add only this: it is freedom itself that still hangs in the balance -- and freedom is never more than one generation from extinction.

Some continue to think of the world's best military as a laboratory for social experiments. Well, I'm here to tell you that nothing could be farther from the truth. We are at peace today and we have that peace through strength, and you, our military, are the providers of that strength. Most importantly of all, you are not wagers of wars, but keepers of the peace.

I'm tired of listening to those naysayers -- I heard them often during my own years as Commander-in-Chief. Our military buildup, we were told, threatened a dangerous escalation of tensions. Our deploying of Pershings and cruise missiles in Europe would destroy any hope for negotiations with the Soviet Union, they said. Our insistence on S.D.I. would scuttle the I.N.F. Treaty. And what kind of fool would call the Soviet Union an "evil empire," and say that communism was destined for the ashheap of history?

You know, I have to wonder: Just how many times do some people have to be wrong, on so many crucial points, before they start asking themselves a few questions? But you know what some of those critics are saying today? Some of the same people who said our policies were doomed to failure because the Soviets were supposedly too strong are now trying to argue that our policies made no difference because the "evil empire" was doomed to collapse no matter what we did! Looks to me like it ought to be time again for "knob answer" three: "Sir, no excuse, sir."

Today, having achieved the victory over communism that some said we were foolish to even seek, America faces the question of military preparedness in a post-Cold War era. And we are hearing some of the same old voices of the "blame the military crowd", but they're uttering a slightly different message. Before, their theme was that American military might was too costly and too dangerous. Now, they claim that it is too costly and largely unnecessary -- that danger is past and the war is won.

It is said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. And I'd like to offer several reasons why we must stay strong militarily:

First, despite the spread of democracy and capitalism, human nature has not changed. It is still an unpredictable mixture of good and evil. Our enemies may be irrational, even outright insane -- driven by nationalism, religion, ethnicity or ideology. They do not fear the United States for its diplomatic skills or the number of automobiles and software programs it produces. They respect only the firepower of our tanks, planes and helicopter gunships.

Second, the Soviet Union may be gone, but even small powers can destroy global peace and security. The modern world is filled with vulnerable "choke-points" -- military, geographic, political and economic. The actual lives at stake may be few in number. But, in an era of mass

communications, a well-aimed assault can topple governments, cause economic dislocations and spark international conflict. Iraq came close to taking over two-thirds of the world's oil reserves. Terrorists have attacked airplanes, boats, government buildings, the Olympic games, and even the World Trade Center.

Third, technology -- for all its blessings -- can enable new enemies to rise up overnight. Scientific information flows to ambitious dictators faster than ever. The research and development cycle for new products has shrunk from ten years to five years to two years or even shorter. Technology turns the world upside down. When I was a boy in Illinois, Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers dominated the global marketplace with their marvelous machines. But I was not long out of college when Adolf Hitler's sophisticated tanks and bombers over-ran Europe. Nazi Germany also built the first jet plane and it came frightfully close to inventing the atomic bomb before we did.

The Soviet Union was devastated by Hitler's invasion in the early 1940's. Yet the communist nation quickly rose from the ashes and developed the hydrogen bomb. And few people expected Iraq to recover so quickly from its horrendous war with Iran in the 1980's.

And who can predict what will be the "blitzkriegs" of tomorrow? Nearly two dozen nations will be able to produce ballistic missiles by the year 2000. On top of that, thousands of nuclear weapons and poorly paid nuclear technicians float around the former Soviet Union -- available to the highest bidder.

Over the past few months, we've heard quite a few odd announcements coming out of Washington. Just this week, the new administration announced plans to slash the Strategic Defense Initiative program. They have been all too eager to denounce this program for years and they have been proven wrong, time and time again. I am quite proud of the S.D.I. program we launched a decade ago. I feel it played an instrumental role in our victory over communism. Now, I may not be a Rhodes Scholar, but I do know this: if we can protect America with a defensive shield from incoming missile attacks, we should by all means do so. And if the new administration in Washington thinks we are no longer at risk, they need to open their eyes and take a long, hard look at the world.

The Romans warned long ago, "Let him who desires peace prepare for war." Washington would echo these words in the very first State of the Union Address, reiterating to his countrymen one of the simple truths of the ages -- "to be prepared for war is one of the effectual means of preserving peace." Yet it seems we must re-learn this lesson time and time again, often at terrible cost. I know.

In my eighty-two years, I've seen America drop her guard time and time again -- and each time with tragic consequences. In 1916, Woodrow Wilson won the election on a promise that he would keep the nation out of war. Shortly afterwards, an unprepared America was sucked into World War I. In 1940, President Roosevelt won re-election on a peace platform. That peace platform soon crumbled under the bombs of Pearl Harbor. After World War II, we disarmed virtually overnight. Before you knew it, our army was being pushed around by ragtag troops in Korea. And later, the Soviets shocked us by launching Sputnik and by invading Afghanistan. Today, the United States dominates the world arena. Once again, our noble first instinct is to seek peace. And that's why America needs the brave and skilled soldiers of The Citadel more than ever. Just in case.

As General Colin Powell -- my former National Security Advisor and now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- has noted, we need a powerful military that can solve small problems before they become big, bloody ones.

We cannot allow another Saddam Hussein to grab every oil patch in the Middle East.

It would be difficult to sit on the sidelines in Bosnia and watch the slaughter of innocent men, women and children and allow war to spread elsewhere in Europe. For let us not forget that that is the exact place that the first World War began.

When I was about your age, President Roosevelt said we had "nothing to fear but fear itself." Today, in much different times, our prosperous nation has little to fear but complacency itself. We must stay strong and flexible. We must keep our powder dry. And this venerable academic institution has an historic obligation to preserve the liberty of America.

Savor these moments. Keep these memories close to your heart. Cherish your families and friends because we never know what the future will bring. Live each day to the fullest. Because it is you who will lay the solid foundations of a free society.

You are ready to build the homes, the neighborhoods and businesses of the 21st century. A noble defender of freedom, General Douglas MacArthur, knew well the qualities of a soldier patriot. During the desperate early days of World War II, when our victory in the Pacific was by no means assured, he wrote a prayer for someone he loved dearly -- his young son. Perhaps it could have been written by any father or mother here today.

Here is part of the General's prayer:

"Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid. One who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory. Build me a son whose wishes will not take the place of deed; a son who will know Thee -- and that to know himself is the foundation stone of knowledge.

Give him humility, so that he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom, and the meekness of true strength.

Then, I, his father, will dare to whisper, 'I have not lived in vain.'"

Cadets, live each day with enthusiasm, optimism, hope and honor. If you do, I am convinced that your contribution to this wonderful experiment we call America will be greater than we ever imagined.

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