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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
TO THE PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS  
IN THE EAST ROOM.

(AS ACTUALLY DELIVERED)

Mr. Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen: I cannot say that I am unaccustomed to public speaking. But I do speak before this audience with some trepidation — as a parent who has not yet come close to mastering the New Math.

Up against your impressive (*sic*) scores and your scholastic records, I can find comfort for myself only in remembering that Thomas Jefferson once said, "Nobody can conceive that nature ever intended to throw away a Newton upon the occupation of a crown."

If there are no aspiring future Presidents here today, I imagine there are some Newtons, some Franklins, some Edisons, some Whitmans, some Hemingways, and, I would hope, a Robert Frost or a Carl Sandburg.

I am very proud to welcome you to the White House as the first Presidential Scholars. I congratulate you, and I congratulate your parents and your teachers for their part in producing your talents for our times. You are not here today because you are typical or because you are a representative of your generation or of your graduating class. You are here because of what you have accomplished, in your own right, and what you have the capacity to accomplish in the future in your own right. You have excelled in the scholarship of your class of 1964. You have the potential to excel even more in the citizenship of your country of 1974, 1984 or 1994.

I have congratulated you. I want now to challenge you — to challenge you to develop and apply that quality of excellence which is within you. Demagogues and dictators believed of your parents' generation that American youth would prove soft — would love luxury more than they loved liberty — would choose comfort in

preference to courage. Your parents proved that that calculation was wrong.

Today the cynics and doubters believe of your generation that you will be too content with the average to take on the arduous, you will be too concerned with conformity to be creative, too cool to be committed, and too callous to be caring. You will prove this calculation wrong, too.

Your destiny will not be a faceless and thoughtless existence in a dull and dreary society. I believe the destiny of your generation, and your Nation, is a rendezvous (*sic*) with excellence.

Early in this century, William James answered those who complained that our democracy had an instinct for the inferior by saying: ". . . The best of us are filled with the contrary vision of a democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow in justice and its customs shine with beauty. Our better men shall show the way — and we shall follow them."

Today — as really never before — we must look to our better minds to show the way toward our society's greatest day. That is your challenge, and your duty. You are exceptional members of an exceptional generation. You have been born to man's most exceptional opportunity. You are younger than most of the earth's quarrels, and you are older than most of the earth's governments. You are younger than most of man's ignorance, and older than much of his knowledge.

Since you were born, man has developed both the capacity to destroy human life and the capacity to make life worthwhile for all the human race.

A decade ago, many young people made fear and fatalism fashionable in the Fifties. In these Sixties and Seventies, you have a much broader choice than the alternatives of terror and triviality. You are challenged not to serve the mediocre and mundane, but to work toward the great and the grand.

In our cities and in our countryside, you will participate in the building of the second America — just as you will also be partners in building the first world of universal peace and justice and freedom.

Today's vote terminating debate in the United States Senate on the Civil Rights Bill is a historic event. Today's action demonstrates that the national will manifests itself in Congressional action.

One year ago tomorrow, President Kennedy in a radio and television report to the American people, declared, "A great change is at hand and our task and our obligation is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all."

Today's action by the United States Senate is a major contribution to meeting this national responsibility.

That is your challenge - to give your talents and your time in our land and all lands to cleaning away the blight, to sweeping away the shoddiness, to wiping away the injustices and the inequities of the past so that all men may live together in a great world community of decency and of excellence.

What you accomplish as individuals - what all of us accomplish as a Nation - depends upon the goals and values by which we challenge ourselves. The average and the adequate are too low as goals for Americans. Doing slightly more, slightly better year by year, is too slow.

Our aim must be higher; our reach must be farther; our pace must be faster. Our society and its members must aim for, and reach toward, the goals and values of excellence.

By the standards you set, by the services that you render, you will show the world that when the doors of equal opportunity are kept open in our democracy young men and young women will respond with an instinct for excellence such as history has never known.

I congratulate you, each of you, for what you have achieved. I am so proud of you.

I honor you for what I know you, and your generation, will achieve in years to come.

It is good to have you here in the White House today. This will be a memorable occasion for all of us. I am so glad that your work distinguished you so that you could come and be a part of this ceremony.

If I may now be indulged personally for a moment, I would like for you to know Mrs. Johnson and my daughter Lynda Bird.

Thank you.

END

