

## **President Ronald Reagan's remarks to junior high school students**

Here is a transcript of then-President Ronald Reagan's speech and question and answers that he held at the State Dining Room at the White House on November 14, 1988, to mark the beginning of American Education Week. In his remarks, the president refers to Vera M. White, the principal of Jefferson Junior High School.

*Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*

You know, this is a real treat for me -- having you here and to have, in a little while, the chance to answer some of your questions. Let me also offer a special hello to those of you who are watching on C-SPAN and -- or the Instructional Television Network. Thank you for inviting us into your home or your school today.

This marks the beginning of American Education Week, and I'm particularly pleased to be talking to American students in this, the first in a series of speeches that I'll be giving before I leave office. But before we begin here, I have a special message from my roommate. She says to please -- for your families, for your friends, for your country, and most of all for yourselves -- just say no to drugs.

Now, last week the United States did something so exceptional that people around the world marveled at it. Last week the American people freely elected our government. Some ballots were cast by people who were rich and famous, and others were cast by most ordinary people, but each person had the same, one vote. These ballots were cast in secret, and they were counted in the open, not the other way around. And when the votes were totaled, those holding or seeking the highest positions in the land all surrendered to the will of the people. Soon, power will be peacefully transferred from those leaving office to those taking office. And, yes, we do this every election year, and that's what so much of the world marvels at. What we in America take for granted is something that's rare in history and all too remarkable on this globe, the Earth.

The United States is the world's oldest democratic government. And at my age, when I tell you something is the oldest in the world, you can take my word for it; I'm probably talking from personal experience. And it's not just that our government is the oldest of its kind, but that it's based on the world's most revolutionary political idea. You can see that concept in the very first line of our Constitution, and it begins with three simple words: "We the People." In other countries, in their constitutions -- they all have constitutions, and I've read a great many of them, those other ones -- and the difference is so small, but

it's found in those three words. Because their constitutions are documents by the Governments telling the people what they can do. And in our country, our Constitution is by the people, and it tells the Government what it can do. And only those things listed in the Constitution, and nothing else, can Government do. So, in America, it is the people who are in charge. And one day you'll be those people out there voting and creating the Government.

That vision of self-government was the basis for the American Revolution, the first revolution of its kind and one of the most important historic events not just for our own nation but for all humanity. Because most revolutions have always just been a case of replacing one set of rulers for another set of rulers. Ours was that kind of a constitution where, for the first time, it was announced -- what I've told you before already -- that the people were in charge of the Government, not the other way around.

Now, the Revolution may seem like something they say happened a long time ago -- to me 200 years seems just like yesterday -- but I think it'll prove to be America's most important guidepost for the future. I believe that the chief moral task for America in your generation -- a period destined for great change -- will be not so much to chart a new course or launch a new revolution, but to keep faith with the original American Revolution and that remarkable vision of freedom that has brought us two centuries of liberty and is still today transforming the world.

Over these 200 years, country after country has followed our path, and I believe that ultimately all nations will do so. It's no exaggeration to say that the political vision of our Founding Fathers has become the model for the world. This is true not just in the many countries that have turned from despotism to democracy these last years, it's also true even where it's least apparent. It's remarkable to realize that in this century even brutal totalitarian dictatorships kneel at the feet of our Founding Fathers when they try to counterfeit the practices and institutions of democracy in order to claim legitimacy for their ruling their people. Dictators today from Afghanistan to Nicaragua do not want to be called Czar or Commissar; they want to be called Mr. President and to pretend that they rule in the people's name, even if they don't. Yes, even Communist dictators holding power through force, against the will of the people, acknowledge the triumph of the American idea when they go through the motions of holding phony elections, forming rubberstamp legislatures to ratify constitutions that will not be honored, and then using our words to call their regimes democracies or republics.

As a wise Frenchman one wrote: "Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue." But when dictators, even in this fraudulent way, acknowledge the basic truth that the right to rule comes from the consent of the governed, the door to freedom begins to crack open, and it can't very easily be closed again. John Adams said that long before the opening shots of America's war for independence -- he was one of our Founding Fathers, as you know -- our revolution had already occurred "in the hearts and minds of the people." And today from Asia to Africa to Latin America and behind the Iron Curtain, the world is in the midst of a democratic revolution that was foretold by the creation of the United States.

From the beginning, the American vision was that our country would be the cradle of freedom for all mankind. Two hundred and thirteen years ago, in Philadelphia, James Allen wrote in this diary that: "If we fail, liberty no longer continues an inhabitant of this globe." But our Founding Fathers didn't fail. And now it's our duty to bring the values of the American Revolution to all the peoples of the world, and this is happening. Today, to a degree never before seen in human history, one nation, the United States, has become the model to be followed and imitated by the rest of the world.

But America's world leadership goes well beyond the tide toward democracy. We also find that more countries than ever before are following America's revolutionary economic message of free enterprise, low taxes, and open world trade. These days, whenever I see foreign leaders, they tell me about their plans for reducing taxes and other economic reforms that they're using, copying what we have done here in our country. I wonder if they realize that this vision of economic freedom -- the freedom to work, to create and produce, to own and use property without the interference of the state -- was central to the American Revolution when the American colonists rebelled against a whole web of economic restrictions, taxes, and barriers to free trade. The message at the Boston Tea Party -- have you studied yet in history about the Boston Tea Party, where, because of a tax, they went down and dumped the tea in the harbor? Well, that was America's original tax revolt. And it was the fruits of our labor -- belonged to us, and not to the state. And that truth is fundamental to both liberty and prosperity.

But beyond politics and economics, we find that American culture has also spread around the world. Whether it's young people in Europe or Africa going to an Eddie Murphy movie or Japanese children visiting Mickey Mouse at the new Disneyland in Tokyo or the international jazz festivals or the American soft drinks and rock music and blue jeans that are the choice of young people from Berlin to Beijing, from Managua to Moscow, the fact is that an entire planet is watching and following us.

The same thing is true with science and technology. We lead the world in Nobel Prizes for science, and virtually all of the most important developments in computers, communications, and biotechnology have been made in the United States. And I can't be the only one who's noticed that the Soviet space shuttle that's supposed to go up at 10 p.m. tonight now -- if they can get it off -- it looks very familiar, an awful lot like ours. Other countries may try to copy what we do, but as the rate of progress accelerates, our leadership will become even greater. And these are the technologies that in your lifetime will change the way people all over the world live and change things for the better.

You know, I've seen remarkable technological change in my lifetime. Maybe I'm just going to date myself as belonging back with the dinosaurs or something when I tell you this, but just think, I can still remember my first ride in an automobile. Before cars, we went by horse and buggy. The horse was very fuel-efficient but kind of slow. And if you wanted to supercharge one, you fed him an extra bag of oats. But in pursuing your education, there is one thing I would like to pass along to you. We should always remember that there are the things that change and the things that don't change. The machines will change -- the horse and buggy to the automobile and so forth -- but the people don't. The permanent truths which give meaning to our lives don't change; they are, as I say, permanent. The basic values of faith and family will be just as true when people are living on distant planets as they are today. So, for America to gain greatest benefit from all the exciting new technologies that lie ahead, we will also need to reaffirm our traditional moral values, because these values are the foundation on which everything we do is built. So, yes, I would encourage you to study the math and science that are at the basis of the new technologies. But in a world of change you also need to pay attention to the moral and spiritual values that will stay with you, unchanged, throughout a long lifetime.

And, again, I would say that the most important thing you can do is to ground yourself in the ideas and values of the American Revolution. And that is a vision that goes beyond economics and politics. It's also a moral vision, grounded in the reverence and faith of those who believed that with God's help they could create a free and democratic nation. They designed a system of limited government that, in John Adams' words, was suited only to a religious people such as ours. Our Founding Fathers were the descendents of the Pilgrims -- men and women who came to America seeking freedom of worship -- who prospered here and offered a prayer of thanksgiving, something we've continued to do each year, and so that we'll do it again on Thursday of next week.

By renewing our commitment to the original values of the American Revolution and to the principles of "We the People," we can best preserve our liberty and expand the progress of freedom in the world, which is the purpose for which America was founded.

Here, on a continent nestled between two oceans, our country is unique in the world. We have drawn our people from virtually every other nation on Earth, and what we've created here as Americans has touched every corner of the globe.

Here in the White House there's a famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And it shows many of the great men of that time assembled in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. But when you look closely at the painting, you see that some of the figures in the hall are just outlines, waiting to be filled in, the faces have not yet been drawn. You see, this great painting isn't finished. But what the people who gathered in Philadelphia two centuries ago set out to do is not yet finished, either. And that, I suppose, is why the painting is the way it is. America is not yet complete, and it's up to each one of us to help complete it. And each one of you can place yourself in that painting. You can become one of the those immortal figures by helping to build and renew America.

And we're entering one of the most exciting times in history, a time of unlimited possibilities, bounded only by the size of your imagination, the depth of your heart, and the character of your courage. More than two centuries of American history -- the contributions of the millions of people who have come before us have been given to us as our birthright. All we can do to earn what we've received is to dream large dreams, to live lives of kindness, and to keep faith with the unfinished vision of the greatness and wonder of America.

Now it's time for me to ask you for your questions, but first I'd like to ask you one: What are some of the things that you're proudest of and some of the things that are best about America? And maybe I can just take a couple of comments if someone has a comment to make.

Yes?

Q. Okay. My name is Yolanda Coleman. And I'm from Jefferson Junior High School, and I'm a seventh grade student. For one thing, I'm so happy that America is a free country and that we have Presidents such as yourself to help us in any kind of way, such as drug-related events and a whole lot of other things that I'm grateful for to be in America.

The President. Young man, you had your hand up. Didn't you have your hand up?

Q. My name is Jason Mills. I'm from Poolesville Junior-Senior High School. And one thing that I'm glad about in America -- --

The President. Can you speak a little louder? I -- --

Q. Okay. One thing that I'm glad about in America is that you can choose what school you can go to, like if it was private or if it was public.

The President. Yes. Anyone else with another comment? Well then, we'll get down to the questions. And what you were talking about in your freedom is something that, for example, in one country, as I have been told, the Soviet Union -- when it comes time to graduate, government representatives come in and point out to the individuals where they will report to work after they have graduated. The Government tells you what you're going to do, not like ours, where we decide, each one of us, what we want to do and then set out to do it.

Well, tell me now, let's have some of your questions. Yes, again?

War on Drugs

Q. Again, my name is Yolanda. Mr. President, do you plan to work with your wife, Nancy Reagan, in the say no to drug program?

The President. Well, yes, I am already. And we have appropriated quite a sum of money for the drug battle. And we have actually gotten more convictions of drug peddlers and longer sentences for them than any other administration. And we have intercepted more drugs and planes and boats and trucks and cars that carry them than has ever been done before. But that isn't the answer to the drugs. They'll still -- with the borders we have and

the coastlines -- they can still get drugs into our country. It has to begin with you, the young people. You have to decide no to drugs. In other words, if we can't keep all the drugs from reaching the customers, let's have the customers turn against the drugs. And that is really the answer. And there is some success in that. A few years ago, 1 out of 9 high school seniors had tried drugs. Today it's less than 1 out of 30. So, we're gaining on it.

### Administration Accomplishments

Q. My name is Yvette Ross, Jefferson Junior High School. I'm an eighth grade student. Mr. President, do you feel that in your two terms as President your administration has carried out the ideas of the Founding Fathers?

The President. No -- I'm having a little trouble -- --

Q. Do you feel that in your two terms as President that you and your administration have carried out the ideas of the Founding Fathers?

The President. Have we carried out the plan set by the Founding Fathers? I think we have subscribed to that. When we came into office, there were some things that we thought were very wrong, including the fact that there were more people unemployed, inflation was robbing the people of their earnings and their money, interest rates were high and all. And in these last several years, we have not only restored prosperity, but we have created almost 18½ million new jobs, added to those jobs that were already there so that unemployment is so far down that today of all the Americans, 16 years of age and up, to whatever age, that pool of people -- 62.7 percent of those people have jobs, are employed today. But also, more important than that, I think we have restored the belief in America's freedom and the obligation that we have to our country. I think there's more patriotism today. We've been in a time when people have gotten rather cynical about those things.

I have to move to this side pretty quick.

## Federal Deficit and Line-Item Veto

Q. My name is Casey Lee, and I'm from St. Stephen's School. And I was wondering what was the most important thing that you wanted to accomplish, but that you weren't able to accomplish as President?

The President. I could sum that up very briefly: the Federal deficit -- the fact that for over a half a century our government has been spending more money than it takes in. And we have a plan working now that is aimed at 1993, of bringing us down each year. Last year we reduced the deficit by around \$70 billion, and this year we're aiming at about another 30 so forth. But that is the thing.

And I think that what we're going to have to have -- and what I want to strive for -- is an amendment to our Constitution that requires the Government every year to balance the budget. And in doing that -- also a tool for the President, and it's called line-item veto.

Now, you probably don't know what that means, but I'll explain very quickly if I can. The line-item veto -- the Congress when they have ways of putting in bills a number of things instead of just a bill to get one thing accomplished. And then with all these hidden things -- and some of them are appropriations, spending bills and so forth -- the President either has to veto the whole bill or let it become law. And sometimes they attach them to a bill that you just can't veto. Line-item veto is what I had as a Governor. Forty-three Governors in the States have line-item veto. It means that you can go into that bill and pick out that single item that has nothing to do with the whole bill and veto that. And I think the President should have it, like the Governors do.

## Federal Budget Deficit

Q. Hi. My name is Ben Allnutt. I go to Poolesville Junior-Senior High School. I was wondering if the younger generation today is going to have to pay for the world debt in years to come?



The President. No, I don't believe that it is that big a problem. You mean our Federal deficit? No, I think that with this thing we have going along -- yes, there will be a time when in the future, when government bonds come due and so forth -- whether it be the taxpayers at that time that are paying them off. But if we can get this plan we're working on into effect, that will come along gradually as those bonds come due. And that, I don't think, will be a great threat to our economy. Truth of the matter is, bad as our Federal debt is, it is much milder than many other countries as a percentage of our gross national product.

Q. My name is Cameron Fitzhugh, and I'm from St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Virginia. I was wondering if you think that it's possible to decrease the national debt without raising the taxes of the public?

The President. I do. That's a big argument that's going on in government. And I definitely believe it is because one of the principal reasons that we were able to get the economy back on track and create those new jobs and all was we cut the taxes. We reduced them because, you see, the taxes can be such a penalty on people that there's no incentive for them to prosper and earn more and so forth because they have to give so much to the Government. And what we have found is that at the lower rates the Government gets more revenue. There are more people paying taxes because there are more people with jobs. And there are more people willing to earn more money because they get to keep a bigger share of it.

So, today, we're getting more revenue at the lower rates than we were at the higher. And you know something, I studied economics in college when I was young, and I learned there about a man named ibn-Khaldun, who lived 1,200 years ago in Egypt. And 1,200 years ago, he said, "In the beginning of the empire, the rates were low. The tax rates were low, but the revenue was great." He said, "In the end of the empire, when the empire was collapsing, the rates were great, and the revenue was low." So -- all right.

#### Minority Educational Opportunities

Q. My name is Crystal Adair, and I'm an eighth grader attending Jefferson Junior High School. And my question is: Mr. President, for past years, the educational opportunities for blacks and other minorities has not been -- there hasn't been a great deal of them. And

I want to know, during your term in office, what have you done to increase those educational opportunities for us?

The President. Well, we have vastly increased the amount of Federal money that is going into education, although remember that education has always been in the province of the State and the local communities. So, the share of cost of education is not as great for the Federal Government, but we have increased it. We've increased the money that is available for scholarships and for workfare programs for students that have to work their way through, as I did, and also for loan funds for students.

I can assure you that, with regard to any hint of discrimination, we have done more than any other generation -- or administration, I should say, to punish those who attempt to discriminate and to make sure that the opportunities are equal for all. And one of the great things that our administration did when we came in here was immediately turn on to helping something that I think is historically wonderful in our country, and that is the Negro private colleges and universities. And in fact, we helped one of them out that was facing bankruptcy, and bailed it out so that now they are proceeding in a better situation than they've had in the past. But those opportunities are there.

Back there, the young man in the back row, and then I'll take you in the sweater.

## U.S. Space Program

Q. Stuart Washington from Jefferson Junior High School. Mr. President, do you wish to accelerate the rebirth of our National Aeronautical and Space Administration, also known as NASA?

The President. Yes, I think the new frontier in the whole world is out there in space. And we've made such progress in it, and it has proved so rewarding. This isn't talked about much, and many of you probably don't realize that experiments conducted on the shuttle when they're up there in space -- on all kinds of things that had nothing to do with space -- have brought benefits to us back here. Firemen, for example -- a fireproof fabric has changed and made their fireproof garments that they have to wear in battling a fire much lighter -- and that they can do that. Medicines -- certain medicines in which only up in the

gravity-free space can they achieve certain mixtures. And they've come up with things that have been beneficial in that way. So, this is very important that we continue to do this. We were set back by the Challenger tragedy, but we must continue.

## Gun Control

Q. My name is Chris Allen. I'm from Poolesville Junior-Senior High School. I was just wondering what you and Mrs. Reagan feel about the new gun ban law.

The President. What we feel about the new -- --

Q. Gun ban law.

The President. The gun -- --

Q. Ban.

The President. Gun ban? Well, I think there has to be some control. But I thought that in California we had a system that probably was the best. I have never felt that we should, for the law-abiding citizens, take the gun away from them and make it impossible to have one. I think the wrong people will always find a way to get one. But what we had was -- even if today when I go back to California, if I want a gun and go in a store to buy a gun, I have to give them the money, but I have to wait a week, no matter who I am. I have to wait a week and come back then to get the gun, because in that week, my name is presented to investigative element there in the State that checks to make sure that I have no criminal record, that I have no record of mental problems or anything of the kind. Then, and only then, can you pick up the gun and take it with you.

But if I could, I know we're running out of time, but let me just tell you something that -- I got the strangest letter when I was Governor. There was talk about having a gun ban in

California. It didn't go through. But I got a letter from a man in San Quentin prison, and from the prison he wrote me the letter to tell me he was in there for burglary. He was a burglar. And he said, "I just want you to know that if that law goes through, here in San Quentin there will be celebrating throughout the day and night by all the burglars who are in prison because" he said, "we can watch a house we plan to rob for days. We can learn the habits of the people living in that house, to know when is the best time to go in and be a burglar -- rob it." He said, "The only question we can never answer is: Does the man in that house have a gun in the drawer by his bed?" He said, "That's a risk we have to run." He said, "If you tell us in advance they won't have a gun in that drawer by their bed," he said, "the burglars in here will be celebrating forevermore."

I thought he made kind of some common sense. And I don't know why to this day he ever chose to send the letter to me.

All right, this gentleman.

Q. Anil Artis from Jefferson Junior High School. Do you think the "Saturday night special" should be banned?

The President. The what?

Q. Do you think the "Saturday night special" should be banned?

The President. Well, I don't have very much of a quarrel with the very cheap weapon and so forth that makes it so easy for the wrong people to have a gun. I would like to see us concentrate on what I described in California: of making sure that anyone who buys a gun is a responsible citizen and not bent on crime.

Ms. White. Mr. President, thank you very much on behalf of the students. Students, we now have time for one more question.

## Women Political Leaders

Q. Mr. President, my name is Nora Taylor, from St. Agnes School. I was wondering when do you think the first woman President will be in office?

The President. I don't know, but believe me, I'm certainly not against it. I have a feeling, though, that probably the first thing that'll happen is there will be a woman Vice President; and then that will kind of open a door to that. But I have no quarrel with women being President at all.

As a matter of fact, the statesman in the world that I have met that I respect the most is the Prime Minister of England, Margaret Thatcher; and she's done a remarkable job for England. But I guess it takes a little getting used to on the part of some people. But I think it's inevitable that in this country there will be a woman President because they've come up in so many different fields. But it's just my feeling that probably, rather than one of them just entering the fray to run for President to begin with, that maybe it probably would start with one of them -- as we did in the election in 1984, have one running for Vice President. She didn't make it, but that might be the start of it, and I'd welcome it.

I have to quit. I'm sorry about so many hands that didn't reach me. Maybe you'd have to write and leave them with me -- your questions.

I just want to tell you one little added thing about our country, and then I leave. This, again, is a letter I received not too long ago from a man, who wrote and told me this: He said, "You can go to France to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Japan; you cannot become a German or a Japanese, or a Turk, or Greece a Greek. But the one place in the world," he said, "where anyone from any corner of the world can come: America -- come to live and become an American." And no other country has that but ours. This continent, I've always believed, must have been put here for a purpose, between the two great oceans, because it had to be found by people who were dissatisfied with the lack of freedom or religious persecution or whatever in their own countries and came and melded together in this great melting pot and created the United States of America.

Thank you all. It's been a treat.