

America — The Land of Promise

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My dear brothers and sisters, I too want to express my appreciation for that beautiful choral number and for the privilege of being with you this morning. It is a thrill to know that you are the children of the Lord who have been chosen to come forth in these last days to do his work, and I learned on my recent visit to your campus that you are well aware of the world's problems: the disease, the hunger, the poverty, the immorality, man's inhumanity to man. I saw that you are seeking solutions, thoughtfully considering the opinions of others, scientifically seeking the methods, and interacting in ways that may well prepare you to unite and boldly declare that you will follow Jesus Christ to a final victory. This is not to be a game that ends in a tie, nor is it to be one where there is a strategic plan for a last-second shot. It is to be a victory where evil and unrighteousness will be bound and the children of the Lord will be free to be safely gathered into his kingdom. To some, this may seem like an impossible dream at this point in time, but I assure you it is possible and it will happen. However, it can only come about through the efforts of honest men and women who are committed to dedicate their lives to its accomplishment.

America's Struggle for Independence

I feel sure that to some it may seem impossible that George Washington could have ever freed the colonies from the power that controlled them. I'm sure it must have seemed impossible that those colonies could ever unite after the battles of Lexington and Concord when that congress had studied and debated for nearly a full year. I'm sure it was a weary but happy John Adams who wrote to his wife, Abigail, after his tireless efforts in that congress:

Yesterday the greatest question was ever decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater [question] perhaps never was nor will be decided among men. A resolution was passed without one dissenting colony that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states. [The Book of Abigail and John (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.139]

Notice the insight when he added:

Barbara B. Smith was president of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 17 February 1976.

You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not. I am well aware of the toil, and blood, and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these states. Yet through all the gloom, I can see the rays of crashing glory. I can see that the end is more than worth all the means. [The Book of Abigail and John (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 142]

And those were not just idle words when those men pledged their lives and their liberty and their sacred honor. It was not a flamboyant or a glamorous gesture when they signed that document that declared to all the world that there were some compelling arguments necessary for them to break from the power that ruled their lives.

The move for independence came in an age of mental enlightenment, as recognized by Norman Cousins in his book *In God We Trust*. "The seeds of the free mind," he said, concerning that time, "seem to sprout at the same time. Ideas have a life of their own. They can be nourished and brought into active growth by a small number of sensitive, vital minds which somehow seem to respond to the needs of the total organism, however diffused the parts of that organism may be." And so it was with the ideas that brought men to pledge all that they had, in fact life itself, to the founding of this nation.

The precise phrases of the Declaration of Independence seemed to occur to many men at the same time. The framers of the Declaration of Independence had the thrill of recognizing that what they were thinking was being thought by other great minds. What Thomas Jefferson did was to bring the words, the need, and the moment together. We know from the revelations that the Lord raised up these good men to do this mighty work. It was no accident. The remarkable and joyful thing is that these young men and women who lived two hundred years ago accepted the challenge of

their time so effectively. Laced throughout their writing is the evidence of their reliance upon a divine guidance. They appeal in the declaration itself to the world court on the grounds that what they did was in answer to that higher law of God which provides that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.

Our founding fathers had such faith in man. Listen again to the words of Norman Cousins:

The American Founding Fathers . . . believed deeply in the ability of a human being to learn enough in order to take part in self-government; in the capacity of people to make sense of their lives if given reasonable conditions within society itself; in the responsive power of men when exposed to great ideas; in people, to stand under the due process of law; in man, to make basic decisions concerning his religion or his politics or anything else. [In *In God We Trust* (New York: Harper Brothers Publishing, 1958), p. 8]

This is the faith that our Heavenly Father has in us. Inspired by the Lord, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."

America the Free

In the mighty struggle before the world was, God stood firm for the resolution that men had to have their free agency so they could progress. Our Heavenly Father has continued through the ages to offer us knowledge and wisdom and also to allow evil as well as good to exist, so that men might have their options. A sense of destiny seemed to be with the Americans from their earliest encounter with this continent. Listen to John Winthrop's words in the 1600s. He said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to

withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

In Louis Untermeyer's foreword to *The Britannica Library of Great American Writing*, he supports this fact and yet he recognizes the great diversities of America as he describes it and its people:

This is a country of contradictions. Restlessness, a love of movement for its own sake, is distinctly an American trait, but so is the love of the land and the desire to get one's roots deep into it. Americans are avid for experiment. They will buy and try anything new. But they are also devoted to the status quo, to things as they are and to letting well enough alone. They are nostalgic about the last (and lost) frontier; they lament the passing of the past; yet they believe in the ever-expanding limitless future. They are isolationists, and they also see their country as the pivotal force of the world. They are a hybrid product of many kinds, creeds, and colors from every possible racial group, and yet they are a race apart, a polyglot people to whom the letters U.S. mean not only United States, but personally "us".

The typical American cherishes his contradictions. He is both proud and complacent about the size, vigor, and variety of his country, a country intensely devoted to ancient doctrines and the Good Book. And yet he knows that within less than fifty years, this same country has produced two new Bibles, The Book of Mormon and Science and Health. He is likely to seem naïve, apt to regard his nation as the New Jerusalem and himself as one of the specially privileged elect, one who echoes the declaration of John Adams, "I always consider the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination and emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." Yet his very boastfulness stems from a sense of wonder; he shares a gigantic vision which in the midst of vast prairies and breath-taking plateaus rears sky-scraping cities of incredible industry and luxury.

Here we are, you and I—Americans of diverse backgrounds, trying to understand our destiny, celebrating the significant event of the founding of this country, and looking at two hundred years of contradictions and magnificent events side by side. Our view of history is tempered by revealed truth. This country came forth with divine planning and help to provide a climate in which the gospel could be fully restored. Men of all nations were brought together into the melting pot so that they might be prepared and ready to hear the word of God.

At this crossroads in time you stand, quite naturally ready to examine this country's history. Take care how you look. History is not an easy thing to understand. Therefore, read widely, think deeply, and judge wisely. We cannot alter the pages of history, but we need to understand what was done in the past, even if it was not all praiseworthy or of good report, so that we might avoid mistakes in the future. Errors should not blind us to the good that our nation has contributed to the progress of mankind. As a country we have contributed much in the field of government. No other constitution acknowledges that the source of power reposes in the people and that only that power which they delegate belongs to the state. The sober, thoughtful system of checks and balances has stood the severe test of traumatic challenges. This principle of checks and balances stands as a torch in the night. We need to keep that torch burning. The idea of democracy itself has to have new champions. Only about one-fourth of the nations in the world are functioning as democracies. The temptation to wield power is great, and most of the world is still struggling to be freed from the fetters of oppressive governments. No matter how benevolent the dictatorship, control of human life is a terrible price to pay.

A free country is an American dream. Keeping that dream alive in your minds and hearts is a continuing responsibility. Don't be

discouraged by errors, foolishness, or selfishness. Don't be cynical when you observe that not everyone has found the opportunity that you know in this America. Liberty, freedom, democracy, and trust in God—these are, as John Adams said, our “rays of crashing glory;” worthy of our ongoing support whatever the cost. They can be ours; we can be free if we will be free. The Lord has told us this in the scriptures. He has told us that this is a blessed land and it will be free only as long as the inhabitants serve the God of this land. Remember the words of 2 Nephi:

Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound, cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever. [2 Nephi 1:7]

So what is it, my young friends, that you can do for America? Commit yourselves to serve the God of this land. Live according to the truths that he has revealed. Knowing what we know, none of us should do less.

There is so much that you can do to be of help to others and thereby live more fully. Have you walked the hospital corridors and seen the suffering men and women so wracked with pain that they can hardly shuffle one foot in front of the other? Who will find the medicines to cure these ailments? Have you seen the despondency in the eyes of those whose disease knows no stopping point? Who will find the cause? Have you watched with a lump in your throat while someone you loved courageously inched forward on an unsteady leg after extensive surgery and an amputation? The therapy is so long and so hard. Who will care enough to see that the hours of struggle and heartbreak are guided

until new muscles are developed to take over the unaccustomed task? Who will prepare the children to receive all knowledge through more effective teaching? Have you wondered how to solve the difficult problems of land pollution? Somewhere there are answers, and someone will find them. Have you a symphony or a hymn in your soul? Are you getting the knowledge and the discipline so that the world may hear it someday? Who will discover the perfect diets and serve the meals that will allow people to perform up to their full potential? Have you seen the waste of human life in the slums of the world? Who is going to find a way to stop the deadly cycle that leads to such ruined, wasted life? How about the energy crisis or the overriding of existential philosophies? Who is going to make the contact with morality a reality? Are you?

Now is the time of your preparation. You will be better able to help your country if you come to your tomorrows having made the best use of this precious time. You will be of less value if you try to build your life upon expediency and false principles. We all have this responsibility. Shakespeare said it this way: “Be just and fear not. Let all the ends thou aimest at be thy countries, thy gods, and truth.” As you explore that unknown country inside of yourself, look for the talents and dream the dreams that will make you aspire to great and noble things. Then what you leave behind will be a great country; a strong, stable family; a life of significance; a torch still burning bright as the founding fathers gave to you.

Contemporary Challenges for Women

In our day young women are encouraged to reach out and fill their potential in many ways. It is important in so doing that they think carefully about the years ahead. It is important to use wisely these years of preparation to fill their minds and hearts with dreams and with learning and with the eternal perspectives which the gospel provides. The

Church cannot afford to waste any of its precious human resources. Neither can our nation. Both must use resources in ways that will be in keeping with true values and divine approbation.

Women should approach their options and their choices thoughtfully and carefully. When they choose to rear children and thereby build strong family units, they should realize that such a choice offers both challenge and fulfillment. It cannot be merely a spare-time option if we are to give our nation strong, stable families that are society's hope for existence. No society in the history of the world has ever survived the breakdown of the family. So it must be with thoughtful hearts that we hear and heed the prophet's present-day counsel to strengthen family units. The choices made in planning any career, occupation, vocation, or avocation should be those that will have the strongest influence for good upon family units. As a leader of nearly a million Latter-day Saint women in the Relief Society organization, I would use my full power to persuade every young woman to accept with joy the opportunities of her divinely given role as a woman. Be she a student, homemaker, wife, mother, teacher—whatever her chosen profession—she can exemplify womanhood at its best. She can stand for faith and high ideals that will be an inspiration to all around her and to the new and upcoming generation. She can be a guide to them and thereby help them to build that high type of character without which we can never have a strong nation.

Dangers of Military Service for Women

God has told us that men and women are not to be the same. We are of equal worth in his eyes, but we are not the same. So there are activities for which women are best suited and there are activities for which men are best suited. For example, I would not encourage any young Latter-day Saint woman, especially one just out of high school, to become a

military enlistee. Lately into my hands have come brochures designed to persuade our young women to enlist in the military services. I know that many factors, including the extremists of the women's movement, have compelled the government not only to encourage but also to actively recruit young women into the military ranks. As I have looked at the thrust of their appeal, I see page after page enticing young women to enlist. The blandishments for enlistment come in very appealing packages. The emphasis is on personal opportunity, travel, challenge, training, and money.

The success of this strong recruitment effort for women is dramatically apparent in the statistics. The *Salt Lake Tribune* in October 1975 carried an article by Barry Rohan of the Knight newspaper staff. He said, "This fall nearly half of the freshman ROTC classes are women students. The office of the assistant secretary of defense reports great strides in increasing the number of women in uniform. The result of these efforts has been that the number of women serving in the military has increased from 55,000 in 1973 to 97,000 in 1975. The planned goal is 120,000 by 1977." This gives us some idea of the success of the recruitment program. A recent article in the *Deseret News* called it "the latest military invasion—women."

I feel that the regimentation of military life places a great strain upon most women who would enlist in military services. It is difficult for them to live under the pressures of putting their lives so completely into another's charge, resigning their actions so completely to another's discipline.

A recent letter from some concerned parents is typical of some others I have received. It illustrates some of the problems to which I refer. This letter reads:

Dear President Smith:

Some time ago we received a phone call from our daughter. She is in the army. She was crying over the phone. In fact, she was almost hysterical.

She felt she had not one friend on earth. Those she thought were her friends had deserted her and were in fact persecuting her unmercifully—for one reason, because she is a Mormon. To say “we were in despair” is an understatement.

A second letter was enclosed with the letter from these parents, and let me read it to you in part:

I am your daughter’s Relief Society visiting teacher. My companion and I were at first unable to locate her. When we did, we found a depressed and mixed-up young lady. I’m not connected with the military, and I soon had my eyes opened to the unfortunate circumstances in which young girls in the military may find themselves. How very difficult it would be to keep gospel standards in my mind when one was continually subject to the rowdy, cigarette-filled barracks, the regimentation of being dumped into a job for which one is neither suited nor trained.

Since that initial visit, and on following visits as she became aware of the Church here, a distinct change came over her. As far as her work would permit, she attended many ward functions, and all were aware of her friendly presence. One could almost measure the light that came back into her lovely eyes. She began to smile as she realized that people cared.

You’re going to be welcoming home a very special daughter, and I shall miss her because she is my friend. I shall always be grateful to her for showing me the change that can come into one’s life when he grasps firmly the iron rod.

I would hope that all Latter-day Saint young women would think long and hard about the regimentation of enlistment in military service, for our experience with young women in the military is very disappointing. A career military officer who is a good Latter-day Saint observed, “I have seen both sides of the story—clean, wholesome young ladies who have lived their religion and who

have anxiously and effectively shared it with others. And then I have sadly witnessed some of these young ladies become engulfed in the filth and mire; unfortunately, the majority of the cases fall into the latter category.”

Very little moral guidance is provided by the military. Each person sets his own set of values. The result is consistent with current trends in society. As Latter-day Saints, however, we are committed to live according to a God-given set of values. Moral integrity is not what *we* say is right. Moral cleanliness and integrity will *always* be that which God has revealed. Whether we live that way or not is up to us. The special conditions of regimentation, assigned living quarters, make it difficult to remove oneself from unwholesome environments and their consequent pressures and temptations. We must do our best to keep ourselves free from situations that might cause us to compromise our standards.

Now, as I’ve voiced my concern for a young woman choosing to become enlisted into the regular military ranks, I am at the same time in favor of military service organizations, such as the ones you have here on campus. One of my daughters found great growth as she participated in and was commandant of Angel Flight here at Brigham Young University. She learned personal discipline. She found pleasure in her associates. The Angel Flight Drill Team was particularly successful that year, and she took pride in their accomplishments. I raise my concerns about service in the military, particularly for young women, because I want them to make knowledgeable choices. At the same time I recognize the great good of the military. I have personal knowledge of the great good being accomplished throughout the world by Latter-day Saint military personnel. I have seen their good influence as I traveled through the Far East countries with the General Authorities for the area conferences. I saw many people who had accepted the gospel and its teachings because of the lives and the examples of good

Latter-day Saint military men and women. I pay them high tribute. I know that we need such leaders who give their lives to protect our country from destruction and who will keep alive the ideals of morality, Christian living, and freedom upon which our democracy is founded. They are a strength to our country and to our Church throughout the world.

I know that a dedicated, strong, technically trained, well-directed military is vital to maintaining the good life, the free society, the American dream. Since its founding, however, this country's freedom has been won and maintained largely by a male military which was and is supported by wives, mothers, sisters, sweethearts especially dedicated to the principles of freedom, but, in my judgment, making their contribution to its cause in ways best suited to women. I hope that women will do in the future as they have done over and over again in the past—save families.

I remember with pride the women who have been willing to help when the need arose. In the revolutionary period most of the women maintained homes and families while their men were at war. Some of them, like Molly Pitcher, fired cannons when the need was upon them. Pioneer women built great, strong homes, but they too fired guns when they had to. In periods of national emergencies women have always been able to rise to the occasion. During World War II, for example, many thousands of women gave valued service in the military. But even in wartime the home front is at least as vital to victory as is the battlefield. Without it there can be no victories on any front—in wartime or peacetime. So whatever else we do as women, we need to remember that God has given us the home front to defend against all assault. There are many options open to women today, and Latter-day Saint women are caught up in the challenge of this change in society, but we cannot with conviction turn our backs on the divine counsel that women are the homemakers of the world. As

we build a strong home front we provide a supporting line of defense in times of war and peace that is absolutely critical and irreplaceable. Even our national anthem reflects this thought, as in the last stanza we sing, "O thus be it ever, where free men shall stand, between their loved homes and the war's desolation."

America is the great ongoing dream of democracy. America deserves the commitment of our lives to maintain this dream. America's essential ingredients are morality and integrity if we are to preserve this land. America is a land of personal choices and responsibility. America is where you can fulfill your destiny.

Your Future in America

Nobody can tell you what the years ahead will hold for you. You can be sure there will be happy and tender moments. You can be sure there will be days of exciting achievements, and you can be certain there will be "down" days and problems you cannot anticipate. This is the nature of mortality. Your real job is to do whatever comes your way and refine your soul in the doing. You can map out a general path. You can commit to living truth as you see it. You can through your actions tell the world that you are not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, wherever you are, whatever you choose to do, you will be building his kingdom for your children and your children's children. What will this next two hundred years hold for our native land, this land of promise? What do you promise to this great land of promise? If you promise a life of moral purity and integrity, then you again give our nation the fundamental building blocks of greatness and liberty. Without these gifts you give only ashes, for you destroy this great, free land.

As I stand here today I remember Deborah, a mother, a poetess, a judge in Israel who rallied her wavering and oppressed countrymen to battle to accomplish the work needed to save the children of the Lord in her day. Deborah's greatness lay not in her physical

strength but in her moral leadership, in the confidence she inspired that the Lord would aid those who fought for a righteous cause. May we have that same greatness. May we have the vision our founding fathers had of a free nation. It is worth all the sacrifice it took to create it, and it is worth all the sacrifice it will take to maintain it. Thomas Jefferson gave an eloquent reminder: “The people,” he said, “are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”

It is my prayer that as American citizens each of us will search his soul and, as George Washington counseled, rededicate himself and “labor to keep alive . . . that little spark of

celestial fire—conscience.” With that conscience and with the Spirit of the Holy Ghost we, men and women, can accept the challenge of our time and contribute effectively to that which our nation needs the most. We can dream dreams for a future of growth, solutions for problems not yet solved, and hope for the future. We can build a foundation of moral virtue that gives strength and stability as our part in that final victory which will make it possible for the children of the Lord to be safely gathered into his kingdom. May this be our promise to this land of promise, I ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.