

Gerald Ford
LBJ Lecture April 19, 1983

Introduction of the Honorable Gerald R. Ford
The Third Lyndon Baines Johnson
Distinguished Lecturer
Robert L. Hardesty
President
Southwest Texas State University

This occasion marks the third event in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture Series.

Since its initiation last year, this series has attracted some of the most significant personalities of our time.

President Johnson would be excited about this series, for it was his own personal dream for Southwest Texas State University.

Visiting this campus only a week before his death in 1973, President Johnson was accompanied by economist Walter Heller.

Speaking on that day before classes on the campus, he said that he wanted to bring the nation's most influential and respected people to this campus to interact with students and to comment on the issues of the day.

This evening we are continuing President Johnson's dream which now has become an important tradition at SWT.

President Johnson would be particularly pleased to know that this program has become one that involves so many students at all educational levels throughout the area, in fact, throughout his old Congressional District.

As a former teacher himself, President Johnson knew well the advantages of enriching experiences outside the classroom.

This evening is certainly one of those experiences.

It is rare indeed to welcome a former President of the United States to a university campus.

And to have on our campus a President who knew LBJ so well and worked with him over a period of decades when both men served in the Congress of the United States is particularly appropriate for this lecture series.

It is an important occasion for me because both of these men have played important roles in my own experience.

President Johnson brought me into the White House — and to Texas — and President Ford appointed me to the Board of Governors of the United States Postal Service.

Although of different political parties, these two great personalities of our time functioned in close interaction to shape the policies that helped guide the destiny of this nation in the mid-twentieth century.

Both men assumed the office of President under trying circumstances— I President Johnson after the tragic death of John F. Kennedy and President Ford at a period of grave uncertainty.

Both men proved equal to the task.

It is easy to forget the atmosphere of agony and uncertainty and anger that prevailed throughout our government and our nation when Gerald R. Ford became President of the United States.

But history will note that through his leadership, his unquestioned integrity, his open administration, and his profound understanding of the American political system, this man led us away from a grave constitutional crisis.

For that, the American people — all of us — owe him a lasting debt of gratitude.

It is my great pleasure and honor to introduce to you the 38th President of the United States, the Honorable Gerald R. Ford.

Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture

Gerald R. Ford

April 19, 1983

President Hardesty, Governor White, Luci Baines Johnson, distinguished guests, members of the faculty and student body, it's a very high honor and a very great privilege to have the opportunity of coming to this wonderful campus to participate in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture Series.

Although President Johnson and I represented two different political parties in our great political arena, there is no doubt that I admired him tremendously as a person and as a tough competitor. I admired his tremendous ability as a leader in the United States Senate. He was masterful as a leader, as a parliamentarian, as an individual who could get things done in the United States Senate. I admired Lyndon Baines Johnson for his deep conviction that the United States should be a world leader against the Soviet Union and other communist nations.

I strongly supported his policies in Europe. In the Pacific, he was right, and I admired him for his steadfastness. We had our share of domestic political differences, but we both followed some ad vice that another great Texan, former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, used to give to every freshman member of the House of Representatives. Sam used to line up the Democrats and Republicans after they took the oath of office and give them a lecture on how they ought to behave. And the best ad vice that he used to give was, "Learn to disagree without being disagreeable." Even though President Johnson and I had our share of differences, I think we tried to conduct ourselves in that manner. It was my pleasure and privilege to know and to work with Lyndon Baines Johnson and I feel fortunate that I had that opportunity.

In addition, my wife Betty and I strongly believe Lady Bird Johnson was one of our very finest first ladies. On behalf of my wife Betty, I can say that both of us consider Lady Bird a dear and very treasured friend.

Since leaving the White House, and including tonight, I have had the honor and privilege of visiting 104 college and university campuses. In the process I've taught more than 600 classes and responded to more than 6,000 questions from students and faculty. And after all that work, I still haven't acquired tenure.

But the point I really want to make from this grass roots exposure to the students of this country is that I strongly believe that this generation of young people is first class, and we should be very proud of them. I would further add, Governor White, that when the reigns of government are transferred to their hands at the local, state or the national level, our country will be very well served.

Now, to the serious subject that is my topic tonight: What are the principal problems that our nation faces at home and abroad?

Number one, at home we must establish and we must maintain a prosperous, stable economy to meet the needs of our country. Abroad, we must give leadership in resolving the longstanding controversies that exist in the Middle East between Israel and its Arab neighbors. We must also seek a responsible and secure agreement to end the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Now, I don't approve under any circumstances of the economic or the political philosophy of the Soviet Union. You and I know that Russia's agricultural policy has been a total failure, a disaster. They can't produce enough food and fiber for their people. They have to buy from 20 to 26 million metric tons a year in the world market. We also know that Russia's economic policies are insufficient to adequately meet the legitimate demands of the Russian people. There is little or no freedom as we know it in the Soviet Union.

Probably the best illustration of the difference between their society and ours took place last November. On November 2, 1982, in all 50 states of the United States, we had elections for United States senators, members of Congress, governors and local officials. In every state of the union, every person 18 years of age or older had the right to vote, to express themselves in the privacy of the voting booth, to make choices between one person and another, one party and another. As I recall, some 50 million Americans cast their ballots November 2. They made some changes. They sent some new people in and retained others. It was all done in a free country.

Almost the same day last November, while we were voting as free Americans, Mr. Brezhnev died, and the Kremlin met in a very mysterious way: a handful of people decided who the next leader of the Soviet Union would be. Not a single Russian citizen had one degree of influence on how that change of leadership would take place. I think that is the best illustration of the difference between their system — an autocratic, dictatorial system — and ours — a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Even though I strongly disagree with their economic and political systems and allege that they have little or no freedom, I do believe we should negotiate a reduction in nuclear weapons with them. However, while President Reagan negotiates, we have an obligation to maintain and achieve a sufficient margin of safety so that our Army, Navy and Marines will have the capability to maintain the peace, to deter aggression and to meet any contingency that might come our way.

With that margin of safety, President Reagan could and should seek to negotiate a constructive reduction in nuclear arms to alleviate as quickly as possible and as responsibly as possible the nuclear threat.

I negotiated for two days with Mr. Brezhnev in Vladivostok, and we did agree, after some very hard bargaining, to outline the blueprint which we eventually would put into a SALT II agreement. Unfortunately, that never materialized, but I can tell you from sitting opposite Mr. Brezhnev at the negotiating table for many, many hours, that it is possible to achieve — in a pragmatic and practical way — a nuclear agreement that will result in the reduction of nuclear arms by both major powers. I believe that President Reagan is prepared to do the same with Mr. Andropov, but in the meantime it is

absolutely essential that we maintain that sufficient margin of safety to deter aggression and to maintain the peace.

Turning from that to the Middle East — without question the most dangerous hot spot on the globe today — I believe that if there isn't any progress beyond the Camp David agreement, which President Carter helped negotiate, we could have, in the not-too-distant future, the fifth bloody war in the Middle East since 1948.

What can be done about this current impasse, the current stalemate? I happen to believe that to achieve a constructive peace between Israel and the Arab nations, first, all military occupation forces must be withdrawn from Lebanon — Israeli, Syrian and PLO. But that's not enough. In the past eight years what used to be the jewel of the Middle East has become a fragmented nation torn between many different religious and political sects. We must somehow have the Lebanese establish a responsible government for their country. We have to get Lebanon back on the track, back to what it was just a decade ago.

President Reagan's proposal of last September is the new blueprint beyond Camp David. It builds on the Sinai II agreement that was negotiated between Israel and Egypt in my administration and the Camp David agreement which was negotiated during President Carter's administration. But we have to move forward. We must have momentum for peace. It was tragic that the Israeli government under Prime Minister Begin rejected President Reagan's proposal. It was bad politics, in my opinion, and it was bad policy. I also regret that the moderate Arab nations were not as enthusiastic about the Reagan proposal as they might have been. They should have come out more openly and more strongly to say that the Reagan proposal was the next blueprint that could bring about a better peace. I was disappointed that King Hussein of Jordan could not come to the bargaining table. I'm sure he went through agonizing hours trying to negotiate with Mr. Arafat on representation for the Palestinians at the bargaining table. I was disappointed also that Mr. Arafat of the PLO was not able on his part to work out an arrangement with King Hussein.

We have a blueprint that goes beyond Camp David. It's an opportunity for all parties in that distraught area to sit down and negotiate in a bona fide way. I hope and pray that all parties will recognize that this may be the last real chance. They should also realize that if we have stalemate, stalemate, stalemate, we could have another military conflict which would be infinitely more bloody and more costly than any of the others in the past thirty or forty years.

Turning to our problems at home, we have an obligation, whether it's the president in the White House or members of Congress on Capitol Hill, to do "everything possible to maintain the current momentum for a healthy economy. An economic recession developed in our country in the late 1970s. In 1981 and 1982 we went through a serious economic recession.

In 1980 inflation was 13.5 percent per year and the prime interest rate was 21 percent per year. Unemployment was 7.45 percent. It was followed by an even deeper economic problem in 1981 and 1982. Although 1982 was a tough year, there was significant progress beginning to show in the economic statistics, and today you have inflation of three percent or less. In fact, during the first three months of this calendar year, there was a negative inflation. The prime interest rate is now at 10 percent and the trend in interest rates is distinctly downward.

Unemployment is 10.1 percent — much too high. But unemployment is always a laggard as the country comes out of an economic recession. As I travel around the country, I see the dark economic clouds of a few months ago breaking up, and the sun is beginning to shine. I, for one, am very encouraged by what I see in the home-building industry and the automobile industry. It is encouraging to see that consumer confidence has really moved up very, very rapidly.

The second big problem we have is that we must do something about the significantly high federal deficits. It's hard to believe, but this year the deficit will be, according to the experts, \$210 billion. And, unfortunately, the forecast for the next several fiscal years is not significantly better. For fiscal year 1984 the estimate is \$190 billion. And for 1985 the anticipation is about \$180 billion.

I happen to believe that a \$200 billion deficit is bad, but it is not catastrophic. But when we have a \$200 billion deficit here, and a \$190 here and \$180 here, and maybe \$170 in the next year, that is potentially serious. It could, if we don't do something about it, abort the economic recovery that we are now seeing within the United States. It is the obligation of the Congress and the President to take the budget and do something to squeeze out the cost — whether it's defense or domestic policy — so that we can look forward to lower deficits over the next three or four years.

Some of you undoubtedly will disagree with me, but I don't think we should repeal the July income tax reduction because it is needed to keep the consumer in the marketplace. Still, we have to hold the line on domestic spending.

And thirdly — even though I am proud to say to you that I was a hawk, I am a hawk, and I expect to be a hawk — I do not think we have to do all our defense spending in five years. I believe we can stretch out a one-trillion, six-hundred-million-dollar program from five years to six years and buy the same hardware but not quite so quickly. If we stretch it out, we can get the same weapons, but the added twelve months will improve our cash flow and reduce our anticipated deficits.

The Congress probably will not, in my judgment, repeal the 10 percent income tax reduction. I think they will probably hold the line on domestic spending. The indication is that they will reduce the President's defense program from a real gain of about 10 percent down to about 5 percent. They may do some other things in the out years to add to our revenues and thereby reduce our projected deficits. I happen to think that the wiser heads between the White House and the Congress will find an answer. It won't be a Republican budget. It won't be a Democratic budget. I think it will end up a people's budget, and that's what we really want.

Let me conclude with some broad observations. When I get up in the morning and listen to the news or read the morning paper, sometimes I get a little discouraged. There seems to be more bad news than good news. But every-time that happens to me, I think to myself that I've got faith in America. As I look at this audience and get your response, I know you aren't going to sell America short either. I think when we get a little pessimistic, it's good to read our history. When you do, you find that our nation was born in adversity. Our forefathers, two centuries ago, fought for and won our freedom. They gave their lives, their fortunes. And, thank God, they prevailed.

I think it's a beautiful story we find in our history books — thirteen poor, struggling colonies with less than three million people. The leaders of that perilous period gave us the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the American

dream — priceless ideals as well as great documents. Those that followed this group of courageous pioneers forged a nation of 50 states and 232 million Americans of character and dedication.

Our nation has had some stormy seas at home — depressions, riots in our streets, disillusionment in our hearts. At times there was public despair. Many of our fellow citizens lost faith in our economic system, our form of government and, yes, in some high public officials. But history also tells us that our forefathers did more than stand around and wring their hands. They were resolute, and they faced very forthrightly the challenges of their day. They were buffeted about, but they didn't abandon ship. They kept a steady hand on the tiller. They believed, as Abraham Lincoln did, that America is our last best hope. They also agree, as I read history, 'with a statement attributed to Sir Winston Churchill. I'll paraphrase it. Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government in the history of mankind — except it's better than any other that's ever been tried.

There has been, and there still is, a fundamental belief in our society — that the things that unite us as Americans are far, far more enduring than the things that divide us. We have our periodic political battles, and we'll have them in the future, but as campaigns get hotter, as differences become sharper, let's remember to sing but never burn. Remember that all of us — Democrats, independents and Republicans — are striving together to create a more perfect union with liberty and justice and equality for all.

We should remember also our unwritten compact of respect for the convictions of others and faith in the decency of others. It allows all Americans the luxury of rugged political and economic competition. Finally, let's all work to banish war from our shrinking world and hate from our expanding hearts and make this whole planet as full of good will as this room is this evening.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant, 2007-08