

Remarks to the Students and Faculty at Fallston High School in Fallston, Maryland

December 4, 1985

Thank you, Alyson, and thank you all very much. Governor Hughes, Senator Mathias, Representative Bentley, and the representatives of the board of education, the administration, the faculty, and you, the student body -- believe me, it is good to be here. It's great to be here at Fallston High School, home of the Cougars -- [laughter] -- and the Cougar cheerleaders, who I understand will be competing in a big contest this evening. I hope you can all get out to Sunrise [Rising Sun] for that event. I wish I could be there. [Laughter]

You know, I've only been out of school a few years, but -- [laughter] -- they tell me that things have changed quite a bit in the meantime. There's one thing that I bet, though, hasn't changed. When you heard that you'd have to cancel your scheduled class for a special assembly, well, I hope you weren't too disappointed. [Laughter] I know I've been looking forward to this chance to speak to you, because I've got a very important mission that I want young Americans to be a part of. Let me first just give a little background.

As you know, Nancy and I returned almost 2 weeks ago from Geneva where I had several lengthy meetings with General Secretary Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. I had more than 15 hours of discussions with him, including 5 hours of private conversation just between the two of us. I found him to be a determined man, but one who is willing to listen. And I told him about America's deep desire for peace and that we do not threaten the Soviet Union and that I believe the people of both our countries want the same thing -- a safer and better future for themselves and their children. You know, people don't start wars, governments do. Our meeting should be of special importance to all of you. I know you're concerned about the future, about the growth in nuclear arsenals, about injustice and persecution of fellow human beings, and about threats to peace around the world. Well, it's because I shared that concern that I went to Geneva to begin a dialog for peace with Mr. Gorbachev.

We talked about many things -- the need to cut the number of offensive nuclear weapons on each side, the wars of independence being waged by freedom fighters against Soviet-backed regimes around the world, human rights, and how we could improve our overall relationship. I also stressed to Mr. Gorbachev how our nation's commitment to the Strategic Defense Initiative, our research and development of a nonnuclear, high-tech shield that would protect us against ballistic missiles, and how we were committed to that. I told him that SDI was a reason to hope, not to fear; that the advance of technology, which originally gave us ballistic missiles, may soon be able to make them obsolete. I told him that SDI history had taken a positive turn, that men of good will should be rejoicing, that our deliverance from the awful threat of nuclear weapons may be on the horizon, and I suggested to him that I saw the hand of Providence in that. What could be more moral than a system based on protecting human life rather than destroying it? I could no more negotiate away SDI than I could barter with your future. As I told Mr. Gorbachev, as far as I'm concerned, a defense shield is an insurance policy for your future, and I think he understood our sincerity on this issue.

We were realistic going into these meetings with the Soviets. The United States and the Soviet Union are as different as any two nations can be. These differences are based on opposing philosophies and values and no differences could be more profound or meaningful. It is virtually impossible for us to understand their system and how, over these -- what -- 70 years, it has imposed a way of thinking on their people. So, we didn't expect miracles. But we wanted these talks, if possible, to plant the seeds of hope in our relationship, the hope that some day, perhaps, might blossom into a real peace, a lasting peace, resting upon the only foundation on which a true peace can be built -- the indestructible foundation of human freedom. And I was determined to see if we could begin to narrow some of our differences and even come to some agreements where there was common ground. I believe that we've made a good start.

This is the mission I've come to speak to you about. One of the most exciting developments to come out of Geneva was Mr. Gorbachev's agreement to people-to-people exchanges. We're still negotiating the specifics, and it remains to be seen how much the Soviets will be willing to open up their closed society. But our objective is massive exchange programs between private citizens in both countries -- between people, not government bodies. Let's allow the people of the Soviet Union and the people of the United States to get to know each other, without governments getting in the way. And that's one reason I'm here today -- to encourage young people like you from across the country to take part in these people-to-people exchanges as never before in our history. I believe such contacts are an essential part of our

building a lasting foundation for peace, because true peace must be based on openness and people talking to each other rather than about each other, and the peace must also be based on understanding. And that's why I proposed to Mr. Gorbachev that we let young people from each country spend time in the other's schools, universities, summer camps, and homes. Americans would be able to see for themselves what life is like in the Soviet Union, and their young people could see for themselves the freedom and openness of our society and that we do not bear the people of the Soviet Union any ill will.

So, we'll establish scholarship funds to make it possible for the best and the brightest of both countries to take part in these exchanges. We will also exchange teachers to impart a deeper understanding of our respective histories, cultures, and languages -- where we have much to learn from one another. We'll resume cooperation in cancer research to combat one of the century's most hated diseases. And we can jointly prepare for the demands of the 21st century with a cooperative program for the development of educational software. It won't be all work and no play. We'll have regular meets in various sports and increased television coverage of these sports events. We can't eliminate competition from our relationship, but we can channel some of it to the playing fields and courts rather than the international arena. These programs and others that may be worked out will not solve all the problems that exist between us, but they can be a beginning to building communities of trust and understanding. If Soviet mistrust of our country is at the bottom of some of the tension between us, then, I know that even a few hours spent with America's open and eager younger generation would dispel mistrust in even the most suspicious soul. So, those who participate in these programs will be our good-will ambassadors to the Soviet Union.

I know that all of you have dreams and hopes for the future. For some, there are dreams of college and a challenging career; for others, a good job, a car, a house of your own. And most of you, I'm sure, plan to marry and raise a family. All these dreams can come true if we have peace. Twice in my lifetime I have seen world wars that robbed our young people of their dreams. And the awesome power of nuclear weapons makes me even more determined to see that it doesn't happen again. As I've said many times before, a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. So, I went to Geneva to set a course for enduring peace. And while I can't say that the path is clear, we've made a start.

Mr. Gorbachev and I agreed to press on in several arms control areas where there is common ground, especially to achieve deep reductions in nuclear arsenals. We will also continue talking about our differences on regional issues. And we had a heart-to-heart talk about human rights. These are the cornerstones on which peace and your future rest. You and young people like you have a vital role in bringing about a better future by keeping America strong and by helping draw the people of the United States and the Soviet Union closer together. And we will continue the dialog begun at Geneva to reach agreements for deep reductions in nuclear arsenals with strict compliance; to help support an end to the regional conflicts that carry the seeds of wider wars; and to uphold the ideal of human rights and justice for all peoples.

Mr. Gorbachev, as the leader of the Soviet Union -- the new leader -- has held out the promise of change. He has said that he wants better relations between our two nations. Well, what better way than allowing people to travel freely back and forth? Let's begin, at the very least, to draw back the barriers that separate our peoples from one another. We're asking for no more than what the Soviets have already agreed to in the Helsinki accords. Freedom of movement and information, contact between peoples -- the Soviet Union has already signed its name to a commitment to these things. We should have no illusions that people-to-people contacts will solve all the problems, however, that exist between us. The Soviet Union is not a democracy. The hopes and aspirations of the Soviet people have little or no direct effect on government policy. But these changes are a beginning to building a better world, one based on better human understanding. You can have a vital role in bringing about this better future, in drawing the people of our two nations closer together. It's an exciting adventure, one that will not be completed this year or next. But we must begin somewhere. And with God's help, we may reach that free and peaceful world that we all desire.

I promise the young people of America that I will see to it that information on these people-to-people exchanges is widely disseminated. I want all of you throughout America to have a chance to meet and get to know your counterparts in the Soviet Union, so that you can tell them all about this great country of ours. And we'll continue our efforts to reach agreements for deep reductions in nuclear arsenals with strict compliance; to help support an end to regional conflicts; and to see to it that human rights are respected. Together we can build a future that will be safer and more secure for you and your children.

I couldn't help but -- one point in our discussions privately with General Secretary Gorbachev -- when you stop to think that we're all God's children, wherever we may live in the world, I couldn't help but say to him, just think how easy his task and mine might be in these meetings that we held if suddenly there was a threat to this world from some other species, from another planet, outside in the universe. We'd forget all the little local differences that we have between our countries, and we would find out once and for all that we really are all human beings here on this Earth together. Well, I don't suppose we can wait for some alien race to come down and threaten us, but I think that between us we

can bring about that realization.

Thank you all. God bless you all.

Note: The President spoke at 10:17 a.m. in the school theater. He was introduced by Alyson Moore, the 9th grade student representative. Prior to his remarks, the President was presented with a stuffed cougar and the school's academic letter, given to those students demonstrating outstanding academic achievement.