

VITAL SPEECHES

OF THE DAY

VOL. LXVII, No. 19

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Address by DAVID M. ABSHIRE, *President, The Study of the Presidency*

Delivered to the Commencement, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, Washington, D.C., May 25, 2001

I am indeed honored to speak to the graduating class of the esteemed School of Foreign Service. My theme follows the mantra of this ceremony, Tropaia.

The Classical Greeks did indeed recognize the most decisive moment in a battle, not as the heady moment of triumph but rather the moment of decision that made triumph possible. As you so well know, the Greeks hallowed the ground on which a turning point took place with a tropaia — battlefield testament to that pivotal moment. Today, we call those decisive moments “tipping points.” But my theme is that these tipping points often occur in the young lives of great leaders.

In fact, I want to apply the phrase “tipping point” to important events in the young lives of four Presidents of the United States. Each of the four Presidents could be said to have experienced a tipping point that molded his character into later greatness, and these are possible lessons for all of us as we look at their lives.

Today, I encourage you to look at your life - and at the lives of those around you. One strength of this wonderful graduating class before me is its diversity, its international composition. To you citizens of other nations, you surely know from your studies here that Presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, Theodore and Franklin, of whom I speak, played pivotal roles not only in the destiny of our Republic, but also championed the survival and growth of freedom and democracy around the world.

President Lincoln expressed this concept most clearly in his immortal Gettysburg address: that this was a war “testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure” and that “government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” Once a national test of American governance, today Lincoln’s words ring clear around the globe as other people seek to build democratic institutions.

But let me start first with the life of young George Washington. I believe Washington’s turning point occurred when he was a 22-year old Lieutenant Colonel in the British colonial service. Ambitious, head strong, and egotistical, he was known to lose his temper with his superior, Virginia colonial Lieutenant Governor Lord Dinwiddie. He

argued that his salary was insufficient when compared to that of the British regulars. He had become the best horseman in Virginia, but knew it and could also be a horse’s ass. On one ill-fated mission, a strong-willed Lieutenant Colonel Washington led his small force over the Pennsylvania mountains into the Ohio territory, which, at that time, was disputed by the British and the French. Washington camped in an exposed place where he was surprised by the French and Indians, and was forced ignominiously to surrender. In its coverage of the battle, the Times of London portrayed the man who would later be the father of our country as a disgrace to the British colonial service.

Yet, young Washington learned from this and other setbacks, not just a new form of warfare, but he was never again so surprised. Later, as the lord of Mount Vernon, he developed a mature self-control and selflessness in what we nowadays call servant leadership. In contrast to when he was an egotistical Lieutenant Colonel, when he was called to serve as commander-in-chief of our Revolutionary War Forces, he humbly expressed doubts as to his adequacy. Quite in contrast to his quarrels with Governor Dinwiddie over his compensation package, this time he refused to take any pay. However, this great field commander would go on to lose more battles than he won, but from the turning point of his youth, he had learned how to handle setbacks and ultimately win. This lesson would serve him as he made three vital contributions to our country. He won the war. He anchored the Constitutional Convention. He laid a stable foundation for the office of the Presidency. In short, his character molded in some adversity saved this country three times over.

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This material gives the reader the best thoughts of the best minds on current national problems. It also offers the student of public speaking examples of the effective speech of today of those who have attained leadership in the fields of economics, politics, education, sociology, government, criminology, finance, business, taxation, health, law, labor, etc. Thus the student of public speaking obtains the finest text book material with a sound knowledge of public questions.

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