The American Legion

For God and Country

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Remarks

For

Boys State

The American Legion
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It is indeed a privilege to be in the company of so many young men launching their political careers here at Boys State.

As one of some _____ participants in this program, you are in some great company.

Since 1936, more than 1.7 million young men just like yourselves have attended American Legion Boys State.

Reciting these numbers reminds me of an old saying: “You’re one in a million, but there are 10,000 others just like you.”

(PAUSE)

At this very moment, in the grand scheme of things, you are all virtually unknown. You’re just one of millions of high school teenagers swimming upstream in the river of life. I know each of you is in a hurry to reach adulthood.

Trust me, adulthood will come much sooner than later. It's important that you realize the importance of Boys State -- and for two of you, American Legion Boys Nation -- and the impact it will have on the rest of your life.

To prepare for the trials of adulthood, you must have a good, strong foundation. American Legion Boys State can be likened to rebar in strengthening that foundation.

Let me tell you something: Among those 1.7 million alumni of this Boys State program are businessmen, lawyers, educators, military leaders, federal, state and local government officials. Many of them credit their success to the experience gained at Boys State.

Each of you represents a lawyer, educator, military leader, government official or businessman ready to blossom.

As I look at all of your young, eager faces, I am painfully aware of how quickly time flies.

It seems like yesterday that I was the kid in the audience listening to a guest speaker, preparing for the rest of my life.

A year ago, other young men and women were sitting where you are now. Today they are recent high school graduates. Some of these teenagers, by summer's end will be wearing military uniforms, protecting freedom in hundreds of locations around the world.

They will serve their country, thousands of miles away from home, in places you would need a strong magnifying glass to identify on a map.

Granted, it is a different world than the one in which I was a teenager so many years ago. There is no Korean War for this generation. The Cold War has been over for a decade, and our economy, despite some recent slides, is still among the strongest in the world.

We are not living in the times you may have seen on the History Channel.

But you must realize that the reason you are free today, enjoying your freedom, enjoying the right to make your own choices, is because of those young men and women, part of our 1.4 million member active duty and reserve military, serving in 130 countries around the world.

Prosperity makes it easy to forget the price of freedom, paid hundreds of times over with the lives of thousands of young men and women like you.

Just remember though, that if we do not defend this nation, liberty means nothing. It becomes nothing more than a seven-letter word and a memory of how things once were.

Here at American Legion Boys State, you are learning about the workings of state-level government. I'm sure you have heard about the triumphs and tragedies of the brave men who designed that government.

When our country was being formed, liberty was not yet in the grasp of the 13 colonies. It had to be fought for. The 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, recognized as one of the greatest documents in our nation's history, were doing more than signing a piece of paper supporting the formation of the United States of America. They were committing high treason against King George the Third in England.

High treason, an act considered worse than murder. It was betrayal of one's own country. The Declaration of Independence is written evidence of high treason 56 times over. The King's penalty for high treason suffice it to say, was far worse than death.

Those 56 men were willing to take that risk, because they believed "That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

More than 200 years later, that belief still prevails. These days, there is a lot of grumbling about how terrible times in this country are. There is no doubt that our nation has its problems. But it is a very high standard Americans hold to their country.

The beliefs stated in the Declaration of Independence are a tough line to walk. Make no mistake about it, though, we are still the greatest nation in the world. It is our country that answers freedom's call when freedom and democracy is threatened around the world.

You may be thinking to yourselves, "Yeah, but how does all this apply to me?"

I would like to answer you with a quotation from the greatest book ever written: The Bible. First Corinthians 13, verse 11, reads:

"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."

That's still pretty sound advice for making your way in this challenging world.

Young men, you are getting ready to begin your final year in high school. You no doubt have pleasant memories of the time you've spent to get to this point. You should always look back on those memories with fondness, as I do of mine.

But soon it will be time to put these joyous times of high school behind you. You are all gifted people, but you are also recipients of the gift of being American citizens.

With this gift comes a great responsibility. You must fulfill the role of American citizenship by getting an education. I am not just talking about formal education, the kind you receive in a classroom, but the kind of education you get by paying attention to what is happening in the world around you. This kind of education is never complete.

The classic author Mark Twain once wrote, "The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them."

Having the ability to read is pointless if you do not take the time to enrich your mind by reading a good book.

The same can be said for voting.

As you approach your 18th birthday, you have a great opportunity to impact the future of our great nation: You can vote. Get registered and then get out there and vote in local, state and national elections. Flex your democratic muscle and use your privilege of American citizenship.

If you do not exercise your right to vote, then you have no more say in the mechanics of our government than people in China have in theirs.

I am pleased and proud of each and every one of you, for being a part of The American Legion Boys State Program. It is an important first step in getting to know the way our proven political system works.

But remember – you do not have to run for political office to make a difference. Our government is made up of "We the People." Being educated on important issues, and then voting, will ensure that "We the People" remain in control of our nation.

The old cliché goes: "The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow."

I am sure that you have heard that at some point in your lives. It's true, you know.

As you grow from today's youth to lead America tomorrow, you will no doubt influence many people along the way. Remember that, on your climb to the top, it is much better to leave in your wake a trail of praise from people that you helped along the way, rather than a trail of blood and bruises from people you stepped on in your climb.

I am confident that your path will be marked by a trail of praise. You have already begun your journey, and I am happy to know that through your actions, and the actions of other young men and women throughout the nation, our country's future is in good hands.

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