

Madame chief justice, madame vice president, my fellow Americans, of every age, of every sexual identity, of every faith and of no faith, of every ethnicity, of every citizenship and immigrant status, of every political persuasion:

My solemn purpose today is to announce, but not to mourn, the end of the American Empire.

My solemn pledge is that I will expend every last ounce of my strength to restore to full vitality our American Republic.

One of the most treasured tales of our nation's birth is the story of Benjamin Franklin leaving the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Still full of vigor and insight at the age of 81, he had just played a pivotal role in shaping the Constitution. As he left the building that we now call Independence Hall, he was asked what kind of government the delegates had produced. His answer was this: "A republic, if you can keep it."

Sisters and brothers, Franklin's seven-word challenge still faces us today. Sadly, however, we have lost sight of what it means.

We have somehow forgotten that our nation chose to break free from an empire and chart its own independent destiny.

Now, more than ever before, out of the hubris that comes with size and wealth, and out of the fear that choked us after September 11, 2001, we have set our sights on empire, on projecting our power around the world.

We hate to hear ourselves called an empire, because something in our national character still sees imperial ambition as fundamentally wrong. But make no mistake. Though we are a different kind of empire than the Romans or the Ottomans or the British, we have become an empire nonetheless.

We have troops stationed at nearly 800 bases, and our mighty armada of warships roams the seas of our great blue planet, sending to every nation a stark message: Defy us at your peril.

This projection of might comes at a high cost. Our annual defense budget exceeds half a trillion dollars. No other nation in the world approaches that level. Yet all those dollars have not bought us true safety or security.

We have come to accept as normal a permanent state of fear. Indeed, our own government tells us daily, in color code, just how afraid we should be.

At the same time, our political discourse has embraced a vocabulary of fear. Republicans tell us: “Vote for us, and we will make you safe.” Democrats fear that tactic so much that they parrot it back: “No, vote for US, and WE will make you safe.”

The sad reality, sisters and brothers, is that all of us politicians have been fearful to speak the real truth: To be safe, we must radically change not only how we array our forces, but who we are. We must reject our lust for empire and rekindle our dedication to the republic that Benjamin Franklin challenged us to keep.

We must not only preach democracy, but practice what we preach. We rightly rejoice in a 200-year-old Constitution that allows us to change our leadership peacefully time after time, without the rumble of tanks in the streets. But we must also allow other nations to change their governments—without our help. We must learn to refrain from toppling democratically elected governments that we see as threatening to us.

Throughout the 20th century, our nation conspired in the overthrow of too many leaders. President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán of Guatemala and Salvador Allende of Chile are just two examples. Perhaps the most cautionary tale of all was the nightmare that we have created by our actions in Iran. Permit me to spend a few moments reminding you of that dark history.

In 1953, our CIA played the leading role in the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran—a highly accomplished man whose beliefs were wholly compatible with our own. Listen to his words: “There is no better way to govern Iran than democracy and social justice.”

The fatal error that Mossadegh made was to see it as his duty to reclaim for the Iranian people a larger portion of their own oil wealth. That vast national resource was entirely in the control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, dominated by the British empire. When Mossadegh nationalized the oil industry, it saddens me to remind you, our own CIA joined with the British, the empire we had chosen to leave behind almost 200 years earlier, and arranged for the overthrow of Mossadegh.

In his place, we installed the shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. For a quarter of a century, the shah ruled autocratically, with the aid of his cruel security service, Savak, a creature of our CIA. Throughout that shameful era, our nation propped up the shah, sold him our weapons, and helped him to oppress his own people. In return, we believed that he served as our reliable bulwark on the southern border of the Soviet Union.

That seemed a good bargain to the practitioners of *realpolitik*, the cynical brand of statesmanship that elevates our nation’s short-term economic interests over its enduring values.

But the bargain turned sour in 1979, with the Iranian revolution and the capture of American hostages. Those hostages paid the price for our long support of the shah. President Jimmy Carter also paid the price, losing to Ronald Reagan largely because of the hostage crisis.

President Reagan reacted to the Iranian revolution by supporting Iraq in its eight-year war against Iran. Our nation took a series of actions that not only helped Iraq build up chemical weapons, but helped it with the intelligence needed to aim them at the Iranians.

As the 1980s wore on, the same administration flouted the directly expressed will of Congress by selling weapons to Iran, in exchange for the release of hostages, and used the proceeds of those sales to arm the contras who were fighting against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

So, in the same decade, our government sold weapons to Iran, but backed Saddam Hussein in his long war with the Iranians. Not very long after that, our nation went on the march to eject Iraq from Kuwait.

Finally, after a decade of death-dealing economic sanctions and routine bombing of Iraq had nearly brought that nation to its knees, our nation invaded Iraq, ostensibly to rid Saddam of weapons of mass destruction. As the joke went, we were certain he had chemical weapons, because we still had the receipts.

Now that we have toppled Saddam, our former ally against Iran, the nation that grew to hate us because of what we did to Mossadegh, the ultimate irony is that Iran is the greatest beneficiary of our destruction of Iraq.

Sisters and brothers, you have my solemn promise that, as long as you permit me to serve you in this office, our nation will never again engage in the cynical overthrow of governments.

What do I propose to do instead?

First, to make certain that the CIA does a better job of gathering intelligence and that it never again shames us by overthrowing a government, I propose to abolish the directorate of operations and use the savings to bolster our intelligence-gathering capacity. It is a national shame, for example, that our intelligence services have so few Arabic speakers. During my presidency, the number of Arabic speakers in the CIA will increase tenfold, but there will be no more cloak-and-dagger operations that overthrow governments and create enemies.

We will also sharply curtail the defense budget in two ways:

First, we will buy fewer hugely expensive weapons that have absolutely no value in helping protect us from the kind of threats we face today. For example, we will scrap the quixotic national missile defense system, which has never worked and never will, but has cost us far too many billions of dollars. We will drastically cut the number of aircraft carriers, strategic bombers, and all the other Cold War weapons systems that cost us so much and contribute so little to our real safety.

We will not decide the size of our defense budget by making it a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product. That's a false equation, because it guarantees bigger and bigger defense budgets forever, as long as our nation continues to grow. Rather, we will base our budget on a realistic assessment of threats and on what other nations are spending. We'll spend more than they do, but not obscenely more. Finally, we will enjoy the peace dividend that we expected when the Cold War ended, the dividend that eluded us because of our addiction to high-priced weapons systems.

To defense contractors, that will sound like the end of world. But in my presidency, we will spend billions of dollars to help former defense firms to make a smooth transition into needed peaceful technologies, such as energy-efficient vehicles, new forms of power generation, and better equipment for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Our second strategy for cutting defense spending will be to reduce our insanely expensive system of overseas bases by more than 80 percent. That will enable us to reduce the overall size of our military, so that the remaining forces will be better paid, better trained, and more tightly focused on defending the homeland, where they'll be stationed and where they belong.

This does NOT mean that America will return to isolationism. Quite the contrary, we will be more engaged in the world than ever. But our engagement will take the form of easing the growing gap between the world's richest and poorest people. That gap is a greater threat to world peace than any other force on Earth.

Yes, we are the richest, most powerful nation on the planet. But that does not confer on us the rights of empire. It imposes on us the obligations of caring. Every famine in Africa, every epidemic in Asia, every tainted water well in Latin America, will stir us to healing action.

But what of the nations that would oppress their own people or act aggressively toward their neighbors? Won't we send our troops to intervene? No, we will not. But we will work within the United Nations to develop a standing international force, specially trained in the tactics of peacekeeping, that can be dispatched quickly, with the full support of the international community, to stop genocide, ethnic cleansing and aggression.

It is high time that the United Nations realized its full potential, and high time that our nation stopped being an obstacle to the development of real and effective internationalism. We mean to make up for lost time in making that organization a more effective instrument for keeping peace.

We also intend to be better citizens of the world.

Instead of walking away from international treaties, we will honor them: treaties to cut down on the trade in small arms, to protect our oceans as a source of food for all of us, to do away with land mines, to eradicate the evil practice of conscripting children into the military, to make clear to the leaders of all nations, including our own, that if they commit crimes against humanity, they will be brought to justice before legitimate international tribunals that fully respect the rule of law.

Instead of turning our back on the gathering threat of global warming, we will become a world leader in finding new ways to cut carbon emissions, without suppressing the growth of nations such as China and India.

Instead of searching for new enemies to match the weapons that our defense industry wants to sell us, we will look for new friends who will join us in making weapons less necessary.

Instead of preaching nuclear nonproliferation while hypocritically maintaining the world's largest nuclear arsenal, we will drastically—and unilaterally, if necessary—reduce the size of our own nuclear stockpiles.

Instead of demonizing our adversaries, we will meet with them, face to face, and negotiate our way through our differences. We will reach out to the civil engineer in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran and persuade him to build bridges of friendship in the region, rather than building nuclear weapons, urge him to stake out common ground with Israel, rather than calling for its eradication. We will sit down over a traditional Korean meal with President Kim Jong-Il and help him to understand why he does not need nuclear weapons to be safe from us.

Instead of emptily preaching democracy abroad, we will show the world how well it can work, by making our elections fairer and more competitive, by reducing the influence of private campaign contributions on public policy, by making sure more Americans reject cynicism and embrace their duty to vote.

Instead of lusting after empire, we will focus our energy on becoming a better republic.

Sisters and brothers, the history of the world is full of empires that saw themselves as invincible and yet crumbled into dust. But history offers us few examples of empires who have looked in the mirror, viewed their image with loathing and made a conscious decision to renounce their desire for world dominance *before* the inevitable forces of imperial decline could bring them down.

My challenge to you is to be fearless in laying aside empire and embracing again the fullness of our dream of a republic.

If we have the courage to stop dealing with the world only through military power, we can become more secure, at a far smaller cost. And here at home, we can focus renewed energy on solving the problems that confront us: providing health care for everyone; building a robust economy with hundreds of thousands of new jobs, in green industries that clean our environment and provide us with healthy and abundant food, and making it possible for every young person to afford a college education.

As long as you permit me to hold this office, my guiding principle will be to overcome the powerful temptation of empire, to support and invigorate our republic, to elevate the tone and the substance of our national discourse, to encourage more of us to vote, to make sure every vote counts.

Sisters and brothers, all across our land, millions of automobiles carry bumper stickers that read, "Proud to be an American." The sad reality is that, reflecting on the ways our government has acted in the past, not all of us have truly felt proud.

It is my fervent hope that, by stepping away from empire and becoming the republic that Ben Franklin challenged us to keep, we can all awake each morning feeling truly proud to be Americans and knowing that our pride is harming no one else.

Join me in making that hope a lived reality. It will not be easy, and it may well cost me any chance to be re-elected. But that would be an infinitesimally small price to pay, if together we can change our nation's course.

Be my partners in casting off the loathsome burdens of empire and accepting the bracing challenge of being a true republic. Help me to turn the nation we love from the world's most feared power to its most loved friend. It will be a grand adventure. I promise.

And finally, may God bless not only the United States of America, but all the nations, rich and poor, in every corner of our wounded world. May God give us the wisdom to find ways to work amicably with all of them and to seek domination over none of them.