

# Address to the Nation on Labor Day

Richard Nixon

September 6, 1971

Good afternoon:

On this Labor Day, 1971, I call upon all Americans to dedicate ourselves to a goal we have rarely been able to achieve in the past 40 years—a new prosperity without war and without inflation.

A nation starting out in quest of a great goal, like a young worker starting out on his career, does not always get what it wants; rather, a nation gets what it deserves.

What must we do, as a nation, to deserve a generation of peace? What must we be, as a people, to deserve and to achieve the new prosperity?

I would like you to join me in exploring one of the basic elements that gives character to a people and which will make it possible for the American people to earn a generation of prosperity in peace.

Central to that character is the competitive spirit. That is the inner drive that for two centuries has made the American workingman unique in the world, that has enabled him to make this land the citadel of individual freedom and of opportunity.

The competitive spirit goes by many names. Most simply and directly, it is called the work ethic.

As the name implies, the work ethic holds that labor is good in itself; that a man or woman at work not only makes a contribution to his fellow man but becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working.

That work ethic is ingrained in the American character. That is why most of us consider it immoral to be lazy or slothful—even if a person is well off enough not to have to work or deliberately avoids work by going on welfare.

That work ethic is why Americans are considered an industrious, purposeful people, and why a poor nation of 3 million people, over a course of two centuries, lifted itself into the position of the most powerful and respected leader of the free world today.

Recently we have seen that work ethic come under attack. We hear voices saying that it is immoral or materialistic to strive for an ever-higher standard of living. We are told that the desire to get ahead must be curbed because it will leave others behind. We are told that it doesn't matter whether America continues to be number one in the world economically and that we should resign ourselves to being number two or number three or even number four. We see some members of disadvantaged groups being told to take the welfare road rather than the road of hard work, self-reliance, and self-respect.

It is not surprising that so many hard working Americans are wondering: What's happening to the work ethic in America today? What's happening to the willingness for self-sacrifice that enabled us to build a great nation, to the moral code that made self-reliance a part of the American character, to the competitive spirit that made it possible for us to lead the world?

One answer to those questions was given in the response of the American people to the new economic policy I announced last month. I called then for some degree of sacrifice, some inconvenience, some belt tightening, some temporary restrictions on our economic freedom in order to create new jobs, to stop the rise in the cost of living, to protect the American dollar.

The overwhelming response to that call is a new justification for every American's faith in himself and faith in his country.

Of course, there have been complaints; there have been counter-suggestions; there have been criticisms by special interest groups.

But the most heartening reaction was the surge of national confidence, the reaffirmation of our competitive spirit, the willingness to make a personal sacrifice in pursuit of worthy goals by the man in the street, the worker on the job, the homemaker trying to balance the family budget.

This letter from a State employee in Texas, whose wife is a schoolteacher, is typical of thousands that came into the White House after I made that speech. It reads: "We were both due for salary increases in September . . . but we will survive. If it were necessary to cut our income in half, I still know no other country I would choose to call my own. I've heard the young people using a phrase that might fit: RIGHT ON."

Let the detractors of America, the doubters of the American spirit, take note. America's competitive spirit, the work ethic of this people, is alive and well on Labor Day, 1971.

The dignity of work, the value of achievement, the morality of self-reliance—none of these is going out of style.

With that fact clearly understood, let us also recognize that the work ethic in America is undergoing some changes. It means that business, labor, and government should explore the new needs of today's wage earners: We must give the individual worker more responsibility—more of the feeling that his opinion counts.

We must find ways to better recognize and reward the extra effort a worker puts into his job.

We must open up new and equal opportunities to allow a person to grow in his job.

And we must give more respect to the proud men and women who do work that is all too often considered "menial."

I read a report recently about some on welfare in one of our cities who objected to taking jobs that they considered menial. As I read that report, I thought of my own father. During the years that I was growing up, he worked as a streetcar motorman, an oil field worker; he worked as a farmer; he worked also in a filling station.

Let us recognize once and for all—no job is menial in America if it leads to self-reliance, self-respect, and individual dignity.

We must make it possible for workers to try "refresher courses" and "second careers" to open up the chance for a new variety in work.

We must reestablish a pride of craftsmanship, a pride in good service, that results in quality workmanship.

And we must make sure that technology does not dehumanize work, but makes it more creative and rewarding for the people who will operate the plants of the future.

These are the needs of the American worker, taking their place alongside the needs we are more familiar with: the need for real wage increases that actually lead to a better life rather than wage increases which are completely eaten up by price increases, the need for steady employment, the need for a safe and clean place to work, the need for medical care and a secure retirement.

In our quest for a better environment, we must always remember that the most important part of the quality of life is the quality of work. And the new need for job satisfaction is the key to the quality of work.

As the American economy moves toward meeting the new needs of the American worker, what should it look for in return? The answer can be summed up in a single, often misunderstood word: productivity.

That word, productivity, puzzles and sometimes frightens people. It sounds like the old “speedup” or some new efficiency system that drives people harder.

Productivity really means getting more out of your work.

When you have the latest technology to help you do your job, it means you can do more with the same effort. That’s why we say investment in modern equipment will increase productivity.

When you have the training you need to improve your skills, you can do more. That’s why we say job training will improve productivity.

When you are organized to do away with red tape and duplicated effort, you can do more. That’s why we say better management techniques will increase productivity.

And when you have your heart in what you’re doing, when it gives you respect and pride as well as a good wage, you naturally do more. That’s why we say job satisfaction is a key to productivity.

And so these are the four elements of productivity: investment in new technology, job training, good management, and high employee motivation. Taken together, they raise the amount each worker actually produces.

Think about what rising productivity means to you and to your family. It means that the individual worker gets a real increase in his wages, and not just a pay raise eaten away by inflation. It means that the consumer gets more for his money, the investor gets a greater return, and more money is available to help those who cannot help themselves in this country.

Think about what rising productivity means to our country.

Nations, like people, never really stand still. As change accelerates, they compete successfully and move ahead, or they relax and they fall behind.

This Nation is not going to turn inward. We are not going to build protective walls to shelter us from fair competition. We are not going to live in our own cocoon while the rest of the world passes us by.

On the contrary, the nation that built its reputation over two centuries for keen competition will compete even more vigorously in the years ahead. By exporting more goods and services, we will create more jobs for our expanding work force.

We welcome fair competition—because it keeps us on our toes, because that alertness leads to increased productivity, because that in turn leads to a better life for the American workingman and for his family. Our success in rising to the challenge of peace will depend on the competitive spirit of the American people.

On this Labor Day, 1971, I am confident that this spirit is strong and healthy among America's 80 million wage earners.

This means that America has the character, the drive, and the greatness to succeed in achieving our goal of a new prosperity in a full generation of peace.

Thank you and good afternoon.

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*Note: The President spoke at 12 noon from Camp David in Maryland. His address was broadcast live on nationwide radio.*

*An advance text of the President's address was released on the same day.*

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