

Governor Jimmy Carter Inaugural Address

January 12, 1971—Atlanta, Georgia

Governor Maddox and other fellow Georgians:

It is a long way from Plains to Atlanta. I started the trip four and a half years ago and, with a four-year detour, I finally made it. I want to thank you all for making it possible for me to be here on what is certainly the greatest day of my life. But now the election is over, and I realize that the test of a man is not how well he campaigned, but how effectively he meets the challenges and responsibilities of his office.

I shall only take a few minutes today to summarize my feelings about Georgia. Later this week my program will be described in some detail in my State of the State and budget messages to the House and Senate.

I am grateful and proud to have with us the Naval Academy Band, because it reminds me now, as it did when I was a midshipman, of the love of our Nation and of its goals and ideals. Our country was founded on the premise that government continually derives its power from independent and free men. If it is to survive, confident and courageous citizens must be willing to assume responsibility for the quality of our government at any particular time in history.

This is a time for truth and frankness. The next four years will not be easy ones. The problems we face will not solve themselves. They demand from us the utmost in dedication and unselfishness. But this is also a time for greatness. Our people are determined to overcome the handicaps of the past and to meet the opportunities of the future with confidence and with courage.

Our people are our most precious possession, and we cannot afford to waste the talents and abilities given by God to any single Georgian. Every adult illiterate, every school dropout, every untrained retarded child is an indictment of us all. Our state pays a terrible and continuing human and financial price for these failures. It is time to end this waste. If Switzerland and Israel and other people can eliminate illiteracy, then so can we. The responsibility is our own, and as Governor, I will not shirk this responsibility.

At the end of a long campaign, I believe I know our people as well as anyone. Based on this knowledge of Georgians, north and south, rural and urban, liberal and conservative, I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over. Our people have already made this major and difficult decision, but we cannot underestimate the challenge of hundreds of minor decisions yet to be made. Our inherent human charity and our religious beliefs will be taxed to the limit. No poor, rural, weak, or black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of

being deprived of the opportunity of an education, a job, or simple justice. We Georgians are fully capable of making our judgments and managing our own affairs. We who are strong or in positions of leadership must realize that the responsibility for making these correct decisions are our own. As Governor, I will never shirk this responsibility.

Georgia is a state of great natural beauty and promise, but the quality of our natural surroundings is threatened because of avarice, procrastination, selfishness, and neglect. Change and development, of course, are necessary for the growth of our population and for the progress of our industrial, agricultural, and recreational life. Our challenge is to insure that such activities avoid destruction and dereliction of our environment. The responsibility of meeting this challenge is our own. As Governor, I will not shirk this responsibility.

In Georgia, we are determined that the law shall be enforced. Peace officers must have our appreciation and our complete support. We cannot educate a child, build a highway, equalize tax burdens, create harmony among our people, or preserve basic human freedom unless we have an orderly society. Crime and lack of justice are especially cruel to those who are least able to protect themselves. Swift arrest and trial and fair punishment should be expected by those who would break our laws. It is equally important to us that every effort be made to rehabilitate law breakers into useful and productive members of society. We have not yet attained these goals in Georgia, but now we must. The proper function of a government is to make it easy for man to do good and difficult for him to do evil. This responsibility is our own. I will not shirk this responsibility.

Like thousands of other businessmen in Georgia, I have always attempted to conduct my business in an honest and efficient manner. Like thousands of other citizens, I expect from government the same.

The functions of government should be administered so as to justify confidence and pride.

Taxes should be minimal and fair.

Rural and urban people should easily discern the mutuality of their goals and opportunities. We should make our major investments in people, not buildings.

With wisdom and justice we should take future actions according to carefully considered long-range plans and priorities.

Governments closest to the people should be strengthened, and the efforts of our local, state, and federal governments need to be thoroughly coordinated.

We should remember that the state can best be served by a strong, independent governor, working with a strong and independent legislature.

Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. We have a right to expect that these wants will be provided by this wisdom.

The test of a government is not how popular it is with the powerful and privileged few, but how honestly and fairly it deals with the many who must depend upon it.

William Jennings Bryan said, “Destiny is not a matter of change, it is a matter of choice: Destiny is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.”

Here around me are seated the members of the Georgia Legislature and other state officials. They are dedicated and honest men and women. They love this state as you love it and as I love it. But no group of elected officers, no matter how dedicated or enlightened, can control the destiny of a great state like ours. What officials can solve alone the problems of crime, welfare, illiteracy, disease, injustice, pollution, or waste? This control rests in your hands, the people of Georgia.

In a democracy, no government can be stronger, or wiser, or more just than its people. The idealism of a college student, the compassion of a woman, the common sense of a businessman, the time and experience of a retired couple, and the vision of political leaders must all be harnessed to bring out the best in our State.

As I have said many times during the past few years, I am determined that at the end of this administration we shall be able to stand up anywhere in the world — in New York, in California, in Florida — and say, “I’m a Georgian” – and be proud of it.

I welcome the challenge and the opportunity of serving as governor of our state during the next four years. I promise you my best. I ask of you your best.

Thank you very much.