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APRIL 13, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
UPON SIGNING
S. 2920 AND H.J. RES 670
TWO BILLS HONORING THOMAS JEFFERSON
AND
COMMEMORATING THE BIRTH OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON MEMORIAL

12:20 P.M. EST

Secretary Kleppe, Captain Barnes, distinguished guests -- including the fine choir from the College of William and Mary, Thomas Jefferson's alma mater -- ladies and gentlemen:

Today we pay tribute to Thomas Jefferson. Two hundred years of American history have produced no man whose achievements are better known. In his own epitaph he cited just three -- author of the Declaration of American Independence, author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and father of the University of Virginia.

Had those been only his basic accomplishment, he would have earned his place in history, and our unyielding gratitude, but we know Jefferson in other ways as well. We know the character of the man who embodied our national heritage by encompassing the spirit of pioneer and aristocrat, American and world citizen, the values of nature and the values of civilization.

In politics, we know him as a lawyer and as a legislator, as a member of the Continental Congress, Ambassador to France, our nation's third President, and its first Secretary of State. In our national life, we know him as a scientist and agronomist, as an artist, architect and inventor.

Thomas Jefferson's achievements range from our decimal system of coinage to the great area of our nation itself, which he doubled through the Louisiana Purchase. But, Thomas Jefferson's contributions to our nation's history is far, far more than the sum of these diverse accomplishments. The very range of his interests has heightened his impact on later generations.

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It is a quirk of history that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both signers of the Declaration of Independence, died on July 4, 1826, 50 years to the day of its adoption. John Adams last words were "Jefferson still lives." History shows Adams was wrong because Jefferson had died a mere five hours earlier, but history also has confirmed Adams words because Thomas Jefferson lives in each of us.

We are all his successors, and it is up to us, not history, to see that Jefferson's faith survives. Great citizens and their great thoughts are not just for their own time, but forever. Jefferson's true importance lies in the fact that he continues to speak of the American experience.

In every generation, Americans have turned to Jefferson for comfort and inspiration. They have found new meanings, often conflicting meanings, in his words. In their search for Jefferson's spirit, Americans have sought themselves. To Abraham Lincoln, the principles of Jefferson were the definitions and axioms of free society, a society he was struggling to preserve, and Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, gave those principles new significance.

Three generations later, another great American leader, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, locked in another war for freedom, dedicated this memorial as a shrine to freedom. On the 200th anniversary of Jefferson's birth, he called for a commitment to Jefferson's cause not by words alone, but by sacrifice. In this 200th year of the nation Jefferson helped to found, it seems our America has changed so much that when we compare it with Jefferson's America, the differences are more striking than the similarities.

We are no longer a young, isolated, agricultural nation but an industrial giant in a nuclear age. Thomas Jefferson would have been the first to recognize that different times demands different policies. He stressed that the earth belongs always to the living generation. In our Bicentennial year, we turn once again to Jefferson's words and find them surprisingly modern.

Jefferson's principle of limited Government, his concern about excessive centralization of Governmental power at the expense of State and local responsibility, and individual freedom are as much a part of the debate of 1976 as they were in 1776.

I believe that in this debate the wisdom and the philosophy of Jefferson will prevail. We find he believed that not every difference of opinion is a difference of principle and that he tolerated error in the confidence that truth would triumph.

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Jefferson was a fervent believer in freedom of the press. Although harshly attacked and often vilified, he maintained an unfettered press was essential to American freedom. We find the meaning of democracy in his immortal words, that "Though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable, that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect."

We find he put his trust in the people whom he believed to be basically moderate, patriotic and freedom-loving, and we find above all else his love for freedom and independence. Today, we recognize this in two symbolic gestures.

Jefferson's belief in the freedom and independence of the human mind we honor today by an Act of Congress which names one building of the Library of Congress after him, and Jefferson's belief in the freedom and independence of the American people we honor today by an Act of Congress which designates today as Thomas Jefferson Day.

I believe as we move into our third century of independence there will be an even greater emphasis by our people to find ways and means to meet our needs while limiting the role of Government in the classical Jefferson sense. I see the third century of American independence as a century of individualism.

I see it as a century of personal achievement and fulfillment for all Americans. Let us honor Thomas Jefferson this year and throughout the the next century of our independence by weaving into our national life the qualities, the talents and the ideals which were the warp and woof of his.

Let us practice the responsible individualism and thereby pay tribute to the man we commemorate here. Let us dedicate ourselves to achievement so that we may make this country what it has the potential to be. Let us maintain for America its rightful place of leadership in the councils of nations of the world.

Let us extend the boundaries of human freedom here at home and beyond our shores. Let us accept and discharge the responsibilities as a people upon whom providence has bestowed so much. Let us be enlightened as a nation with appreciation for learning, for reason and for justice for all our people.

In this way, my fellow Americans, we shall pay honor to the man from Monticello.

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It is now my honor to sign two pieces of legislation relating to Thomas Jefferson. I would like to ask the Members of Congress present to join me at the signing table.

It is now my pleasure to sign House Joint Resolution 670, designating April 13 as Thomas Jefferson Day. Representative Bob McClory was the principal sponsor, and so as I sign this, I will give him this pen and we will distribute the others.

Now it is my honor to sign S. 2920, the legislation which officially designates the Library of Congress Annex as the Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson Building. I think on this occasion it would be appropriate to give this pen to the senior Senator from Virginia, the Honorable Harry Byrd.

Thank you.

END

(AT 12:32 P.M. EST)