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The Bicentennial Speeches of  
Gerald R. Ford

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TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
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I am standing before the great charters of American liberty under law.

Millions of Americans, before me and after me, will have looked and lingered over these priceless documents that have guided our 200 years of high adventure as "a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Those were Lincoln's words, as he looked to the Declaration of Independence for guidance when a raging storm obscured the Constitution. We are gathered here to honor both.

Even the way these parchments are displayed is instructive:

- together, as they must be historically understood;
- the Constitution and its first 10 Amendments on an equal plane;
- The Declaration of Independence properly central and above all.

The Declaration is the Polaris of our political order -- the fixed star of freedom. It is impervious to change because it states moral truths that are eternal.

The Constitution provides for its own changes, having equal force with the original articles. It began to change soon after it was ratified when the Bill of Rights was added. We have since amended it 16 more times and before we celebrate our 300th birthday there will be more changes.

But the Declaration will be there, exactly as it was when the Continental Congress adopted it --- after eliminating and changing some of Jefferson's draft, much to his annoyance. Jefferson's immortal words will remain, and they will be preserved in human hearts even if this original parchment should fall victim to time and fate. Listen:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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 -- That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed."

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The act of Independence the actual separation of colonies and Crown took place 200 years ago today, when the delegations of 12 colonies adopted Richard Henry Lee's resolution of independence. The founders expected that July 2 would be celebrated as the national holiday of the newborn Republic, but they took two more days to debate and approve this declaration, an announcement to the world of what they had done and of the reasons why.

The Declaration and other great documents of our heritage remind me of the flying machines across the Mall in the new museum we opened yesterday. From the Spirit of St. Louis to the lunar orbital capsules we see vehicles that enabled Americans to cross vast distances in space. In our archives and libraries we find documents to transport us across centuries in time back to Mount Sinai and the Sea of Galilee, to Runnymede, to the pitching cabin of the Mayflower, and to sweltering Philadelphia in midsummer of 1776.

If we maneuver our time vehicle along to 1787 we see the same chamber of Independence Hall, where the Constitution is being drafted under the stern eye of George Washington. Some faces are familiar. Benjamin Franklin is there of course, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. Thomas Jefferson has gone to Paris the quiet genius of this Convention is James Madison.

But Jefferson's great principles are very much present. The Constitution, when it is done, will translate the great ideas of the Declaration into a legal mechanism for effective government, where the unalienable rights of individual Americans are secure.

In grade school, we were taught to memorize the first and last parts of the Declaration. Nowadays even many scholars skip over the long recitation of alleged abuses by King George III and his misguided ministers. But occasionally we ought to read them because the injuries and invasions of individual rights listed there are the very excesses of governmental power which the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments were designed to prevent.

The familiar parts of the Declaration describe the positives of freedom the dull part the negatives. Not all the rights of free people, nor all the necessary powers of government, can be enumerated in one writing or for all time, as Madison and his colleagues made plain in the 9th and 10th Amendments.

But the source of all unalienable rights the proper purposes for which governments are instituted among men and the reasons why free people should consent to an equitable ordering of their God-given freedom, have never been better stated than by Jefferson in our Declaration of Independence.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are cited as being among the most precious endowments of the Creator, but not the only ones. Earlier, Jefferson wrote that the God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time

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This better explains the bold assertion that "All men are created equal" which Americans have debated for two centuries. We obviously are not equal in size, or wisdom, or strength, or fortune. But we are all born --- having had nothing at all to say about it. And from the moment we have a life of our own we have a liberty of our own, and we receive both in equal shares. We are all born free in the eyes of God.

That eternal truth is the great promise of the Declaration; but it certainly was not self-evident to most of mankind in 1776; I regret to say it is not universally accepted in 1976. Yet the American adventure not only proclaimed it, for 200 years we have consistently sought to prove it true. The Declaration is the promise of freedom; the Constitution continuously seeks the fulfillment of freedom. The Constitution was created and continues --- as its preamble states --- "to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

The great promise of the Declaration requires far more than the patriot sacrifices of the American Revolution, more than the legal stabilizer of the Constitution, more than Lincoln's successful answer to the question of whether a nation so conceived and so dedicated could long endure.

What does the Declaration declare?

- That all human beings have certain rights as a gift from God.
- That these rights cannot lawfully be taken away from any man or woman by any human agency, monarchy or democracy.
- That all governments derive all their just powers from the people, who consent to be governed in order to secure their rights and to effect their safety and happiness.

Thus, both rights and powers belong to the people; the rights equally apportioned to every individual, the powers to the people as a whole.

This November, the whole American people will, under the Constitution, again give their consent to be governed. This free and secret act should be a reaffirmation, by every eligible American, of the mutual pledges made 200 years ago by John Hancock and the others whose untrembling signatures we can still make out.

Jefferson said that the future belongs to the living; we stand awed in the presence of these great charters not by their beauty, not by their antiquity, but because they belong to us. We return thanks that they have guided us safely through two centuries of national independence, but the excitement of this occasion is that they still work.

All around our nation's capital are priceless collections of America's great contributions to the world, but many of them are machines no longer used, inventions no longer needed, clothes no longer worn, books no longer read, songs no longer sung.

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Not so the Constitution, which works for us daily, changing slowly to meet new needs. Not so the Bill of Rights, which protects us day and night in the exercise of our fundamental freedoms -- to pray, to publish, to speak as we please.

Above all stands the magnificent Declaration, still the fixed star of freedom for the United States of America.

Let each of us, in this year of our Bicentennial, join with those brave and farsighted Americans in 1776. Let us here and now mutually pledge to the ennobling and enduring principles of the Declaration our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

And let us do so, as they did, with firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, that the future of this land we love may be ever brighter for our children and for generations of Americans yet to be born.

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