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THE WHITE HOUSE
REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT
INDEPENDENCE HALL

11:18 A.M. EDT

Charlton Heston, Mayor Rizzo, Governor Shapp, Reverend Clergy, distinguished Members of Congress, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

On Washington's Birthday in 1861, a fortnight after six States had formed a Confederacy of their own, Abraham Lincoln came here to Independence Hall knowing that in ten days he would face the cruelest national crisis of our 85-year history.

"I am filled with deep emotion," he said, "at finding myself standing here in the place where collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live."

Today, we can all share these simple noble sentiments. Like Lincoln, I feel both pride and humility, rejoicing in reverence as I stand in the place where two centuries ago the United States of America was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

From this small but beautiful building, then the most imposing structure in the Colonies, came the two great documents that continue to supply the moral and intellectual power for the American adventure in self-government.

Before me is the great bronze bell that joyously rang out the news of the birth of our Nation from the steeple of the State House. It was never intended to be a church bell. Yet, a generation before the great events of 1776, the elected assembly of Pennsylvania ordered it to be inscribed with this Biblical verse:

"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof."

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The American settlers had many, many hardships, but they had more liberty than any other people on earth. That was what they came for and what they meant to keep. The verse from Leviticus on the Liberty Bell refers to the ancient Jewish year of Jubilee.

In every 50th year, the Jubilee restored the land and the equality of persons that prevailed when the children of Israel entered the land of promise and both gifts came from God, as the Jubilee regularly reminded them.

Our Founding Fathers knew their Bibles as well as their Blackstone. They boldly reversed the age-old political theory that King's derive their powers from God and asserted that both powers and unalienable rights belong to the people as direct endowments from their creator. Furthermore, they declared that Governments are instituted among men to secure their rights and to serve their purposes, and Governments continue only so long as they have the consent of the governed.

With George Washington, already commanding the American Continental Army in the field, the Second Continental Congress met here in 1776, not to demand new liberty, but to regain long-established rights which were being taken away from them without their consent.

The American Revolution was unique and remains unique in that it was fought in the name of the law as well as liberty. At the start, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed the divine source of individual rights and the purpose of human Government as Americans understood it.

That purpose is to secure the rights of the individuals against even Government itself. But, the Declaration did not tell us how to accomplish this purpose or what kind of Government to set up.

First, our independence had to be won. It was not won easily, as the nearby encampment of Valley Forge, the rude bridge at Concord and the crumbling battlements at Yorktown bear vivid interest (interest).

We have heard much, though we cannot hear it too often, about 56 Americans who cast their votes and later signed their names to Thomas Jefferson's ringing declaration of equality and freedom so movingly read to us this morning by Miss Marian Anderson.

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Do you know what price the signers of that parchment paid for their patriotism, the devotion to principle of which Lincoln spoke? John Hancock of Massachusetts was one of the wealthiest men who came to Philadelphia. Later, as he stood outside Boston and watched the enemy sweep by, he said, "Burn Boston, though it makes John Hancock a beggar."

Altogether, of the 56 men who signed our great Declaration, five were taken prisoner, twelve had their homes sacked, two lost their sons and nine died in the war itself.

Those men knew what they were doing. In the final stirring words of the Declaration, they pledged to one another "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." And when liberty was at stake, they were willing to pay the price.

We owe a great debt to these founders and to the foot soldiers who followed General Washington into battle after battle, retreat after retreat. But, it is important to remember that final success in that struggle for independence, as in the many struggles that have followed, was due to the strength and support of ordinary men and women who were motivated by three powerful impulses -- personal freedom, self-government and national unity.

For all but the black slaves--many of whom fought bravely beside their masters because they also heard the promise of the Declaration--freedom was won in 1783, but the loose Articles of Confederation have proved adequate in war and were even less effective in peace.

Again in 1787 representatives of the people and the States met in this place to form a more perfect union, a permanent legal mechanism that would translate the principles and purposes of Jefferson's Declaration into effective self-government.

Six signers of the Declaration came back to forge the Constitution, including the sage of Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson had replaced him as Ambassador in Paris. The young genius of the constitutional convention was another Virginian, James Madison. The hero of the Revolution, Washington, was called back from Mount Vernon to preside.

Seldom in history have the men who made a revolution seen it through, but the United States was fortunate. The result of their deliberation and compromises was our Constitution, which William Gladstone, a great British Prime Minister, called "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."

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The Constitution was created to make the promise of the Declaration come true. The Declaration was not a protest against Government but against the excesses of Government. It prescribed the proper role of Government to secure the rights of individuals and to effect their safety and their happiness.

No modern society, no individual can do this all alone, so Government is not necessarily evil but a necessary good.

The framers of the Constitution feared a central Government that was too strong, as many Americans rightly do today. The framers of the Constitution, after their experience under the Articles, feared a central Government that was too weak, as many Americans rightly do today.

They spent days studying all of the contemporary Governments of Europe and concluded with Dr. Franklin that all contained the seeds of their own destruction. So, the framers built something new, drawing upon their English traditions, on the Roman Republic, on the uniquely American institution of the town meeting to reassure those who felt the original Constitution did not sufficiently spell out the unalienable rights of the Declaration.

The First United States Congress added -- and the States ratified -- the first ten Amendments, which we call the Bill of Rights.

Later, after a tragic fraternal war, those guarantees were expanded to include all Americans. Later still voting rights were assured for women and for younger citizens 18 to 21 years of age.

It is good to know that in our own lifetime we have taken part in the growth of freedom and in the expansion of equality which began here so long ago. This union of corrected wrongs and expanded rights has brought the blessings of liberty to the 215 million Americans, but the struggle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is never truly won.

Each generation of Americans, indeed of all humanity, must strive to achieve these aspirations anew. Liberty is a living flame to be fed, not dead ashes to be revered, even in a Bicentennial year. It is fitting that we ask ourselves hard questions even on a glorious day like today.

Are the institutions under which we live working the way they should? Are the foundations laid in 1776 and 1789 still strong enough and sound enough to resist the tremors of our times? Are our God-given rights secure, our hard-won liberties protected?

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The very fact that we can ask these questions, that we can freely examine and criticize our society, is cause for confidence itself. Many of the voices raised in doubt 200 years ago served to strengthen and improve the decisions finally made.

The American adventure is a continuing process. As one milestone is passed, another is sighted. As we achieve one goal, a longer lifespan, a literate population, a leadership in world affairs, we raise our sights.

As we begin our third century, there is still so much to be done. We must increase the independence of the individual and the opportunity of all Americans to attain their full potential. We must insure each citizen's right to privacy. We must create a more beautiful America, making human works conform to the harmony of nature.

We must develop a safe society, so ordered that happiness may be pursued without fear of crime or man-made hazards. We must build a more stable international order, politically, economically and legally. We must match the great breakthroughs of the past century by improving health and conquering disease.

We must continue to unlock the secrets of the universe beyond our planet as well as within ourselves. We must work to enrich the quality of American life at work, at play and in our homes.

It is right that Americans are always improving. It is not only right, it is necessary. From need comes action, as it did here in Independence Hall. Those fierce political rivals -- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson -- in their later years carried out a warm correspondence. Both died on the Fourth of July of 1826, having lived to see the handiwork of their finest hour endure a full 50 years.

They had seen the Declaration's clear call for human liberty and equality arouse the hopes of all mankind. Jefferson wrote to Adams that "even should the clouds of barbarism and despotism again obscure the science and libraries of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore life and liberty to them."

Over a century later, in 1936, Jefferson's dire prophesy seemed about to come true. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, speaking for a mighty nation, reinforced by millions and millions of immigrants who had joined the American adventure, was able to warn the new despotisms:

"We too, born to freedom, and believing in freedom, are willing to fight to maintain freedom. We, and all others who believe as deeply as we do, would rather die on our feet than live on our knees."

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The world knows where we stand. The world is ever conscious of what Americans are doing for better or for worse because the United States today remains the most successful realization of humanity's universal hope.

The world may or may not follow, but we lead because our whole history says we must. Liberty is for all men and women as a matter of equal and unalienable right. The establishment of justice and peace abroad will in large measure depend upon the peace and justice we create here in our own country, where we still show the way.

The American adventure began here with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence. It continues in a common conviction that the source of our blessings is a loving God, in whom we trust. Therefore, I ask all the members of the American family, our guests and friends, to join me now in a moment of silent prayer and meditation in gratitude for all that we have received and to ask continued safety and happiness for each of us and for the United States of America.

Thank you and God bless you.

END (AT 11:37 A.M. EDT)