

As I began to prepare my comments, I sought to read what had been spoken on the topic of July Fourth in the past. I wanted to gain a sense of the importance of the 4th of July throughout the history of our nation and how this day has come to be a springboard for the expansion of political, social, and economic innovation. Today, I have chosen comments from Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglas, Walt Whitman, and John F. Kennedy as illustrations of the educating power of the fourth of July on America.

Now as you can well imagine the language and focus of these earlier orations were as varied as those individuals and the issues that faced America during their lifetimes. However, there were common themes emerging from the comments of these great Americans, which can be placed in two clear categories. The First of these categorizations is the call to resist oppression and the second speaks of the traditional ideals embodied in the spirit of our American Character .

What better setting could be found to begin a discussion of the call to fight against oppression, than this hallowed place where the spirit of Thomas Jefferson found eternal rest, Our surroundings stirring, within our hearts, the memory of the nation's founding and the emancipation of America from Great Britain.

Very near the end of his life, on June 24th 1826, Thomas Jefferson wrote a commentary on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In that letter Jefferson said that he hoped, "***July 4 be to the world, what I believe it will be -- to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all -- the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.*** For Jefferson the 4th of July was a day to remember not just the act of declaring independence but a day upon which, we would renew our commitment to the philosophical ideals behind the document. Jefferson understood that such ceremony would be necessary for the purpose of educating succeeding

generations in the essential principles of our government, the importance of individual rights and the value of self government {popular sovereignty}. The concluding paragraph of Jefferson's letter of June 24th further advises us that the duty of every citizen is to be vigilant and involved in constraining the power of government by making it the servant of the people as revealed by these words on the relationship between the government and the celebration of the fourth of July. ***"All eyes are open, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."*** How then did Jefferson show innovation. He and the other founding fathers took the ideals of the enlightenment, such as popular sovereignty and individual liberty and created something new in America giving the world an example to emulate, and America a cause to celebrate. His last letter, a commentary on the 4th of July firmly establishes the reason for the celebration and the importance of the day in our lives.

Twenty-six years later Frederick Douglas, in his 1852 fourth of July Speech, gave us another interpretation of the importance of the fourth of July by saying that the spirit of the Fourth of July was similar to the celebration of Passover for the Jewish people. Douglas had been asked to speak in commemoration of Independence Day and spoke eloquently saying that by claiming the right of Independence from Great Britain the founders were delivering political, economic, and personal freedom for Americans. He reminded the listeners that as Jefferson had stated, for the first time people would have, the freedom {self determination} and protections to secure the course of their individual lives. Douglas went on to say the founders understood that government could become tyrannical if it were thought to be infallible. They, the founders, broke from Great Britain and because they felt oppressed, became restive, and saw themselves as victims of oppression by a government which no

longer represented their best interest. Douglas said "***the Declaration of Independence is the RINGBOLT to the chain of your nation's destiny: so indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever the cost.***" In the light of current events and the issues of our own times we need to be reminded that the founders had sought to promote a nation in which justice, humanity, and liberty were the final word. However as Frederick Douglas's speech progressed he used the day to open a dialogue on the issue of slavery, another form of oppression and forced servitude of the people. He used his declaration day speech to awaken people to the plight of Africans and the fundamental unfairness of slavery by comparing the nation of justice, conceived by the founders, to the reality of his time. Douglas asks "***What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim***". By bringing forth the issue on the 4th of July Douglas brought the people of the United States face to face with the fact that the nation was not following the ideals of the founders. Through his speech Douglas established the fourth of July as a time when we can be introspective and evaluate the condition of our Union, be conscious of the realities of our times, and seek to emulate the founders when dealing with the issues which trouble our nation and world. Much of the world has accepted Jefferson's ideas and heard, as Jefferson says, "***the signal of arousing men to burst the chain . . . and to assume the blessings and security of self-government as evidenced by the spread of self government.***" In the Douglas speech we can see that Jefferson was right, all men were arising to burst the chains of oppression. The American legacy of democracy and popular sovereignty demands that today, as in the past, that when we are called to stand by the principles given to us by our founders we as a people do not lose sight of those ideals upon which the nation was founded or forget our legacy as an example of hope to the world. Failure to do so would make Jefferson's ***My God! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on Earth enjoy.***"

statement an prophetic epitaph for shortsightedness and apathy. So today let us celebrate with passion the resistance to oppression and the glorious example which was provided to all the people of the Earth through the bravery and statesmanship of our founding fathers

Having examined how the fourth of July has been used as platform for the call to resistance of oppression, let us now turn to the ideals of America and the traditional core values, passed down from the founders, which have molded our character. In the preface of his historic work "Leaves of Grass" Walt Whitman writes this of America ***"Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations . . . Other states indicate themselves in their deputies but the genius of the United States is in the common people."*** Much has been said and in recent years on the topic of core values. Our view of the world and the subsequent reactions we have are filtered through these fundamental ideas and traditions which I will simply call the American Character. Over the years writers and statesmen have sought to distill these sacred truths into words. In the late nineteenth century poet Walt Whitman identified the American spirit as a "deathless attachment to freedom", a fierceness when roused resentment, a curiosity which welcomed novelty, and wonderful sympathy. In the twentieth century John F. Kennedy spoke of them as classic ideas rooted in religious freedom, enlightened idealism, patriotism, and individualism. In both cases we are left with the sense that the American spirit is one in which the beliefs of the people are in sync with the fundamental principles of the founders. The American spirit is distinct in the world and provides our people the will to resist any attempt to impose injustice and limit freedom. The American spirit that has evolved would be welcomed by Jefferson who once stated that the lack of such a spirit would lead to a lack of involvement and blind trust in leaders and institutions, which may not be able to govern themselves, lest be able to govern others will lead to the failure of our republican form of government. We are required to ask questions and hold government accountable to "We the People."

Then and now the American people have lived by the principles and ideals of the founders and they these traits have become a fixed element of our personal and national character. Americans will not accept tyranny in any form and our idealism has been the backbone of the expansion of democracy throughout the world. Earlier the classic image of the American spirit as defined by John F. Kennedy was discussed and if we take this to be the modern concept of our national character, the following ideals would be evident. America rejects the repression of religious faith in every form, One of the earliest acts of legislation was the constitutional clause saying Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. Second on the list of Characteristics would be patriotism. Americans have a deep sense of patriotism which is instinctual and has given them the unlimited energy required to fight off despotism and totalitarianism, promote freedom, and be willing to stand up for human rights. Lastly Individualism has become a keystone of American character. Individualism supports freedom of thought, freedom of self expression, and freedom of worship. For Americans the right to hold different opinions or the right to put those opinions forward is essential. In his 1946 speech John Fitzgerald Kennedy, then seeking office as Congressman from Massachusetts spoke on American idealism saying ***"Our American idealism finds itself faced by the old world doctrine of power politics . . . but if we remain faithful to the American tradition. our idealism will be a steadfast thing, a constant flame, a torch held aloft for the guidance of other nations.*** John F. Kennedy used his fourth of July address to call for us to be faithful to our traditions and principles, we must honor that call. Some may say that the times have changed, our traditions no longer are valid, or that we must conform to changing world standards. To that we must unanimously answer "No." Two Hundred and Thirty four years ago Thomas Jefferson wrote a document, based on the sound ideals, which became a beacon to the enslaved people of the world, One Hundred fifty- eight years ago Frederick Douglas continued that tradition by calling attention to the slavery of Africans, and Sixty-four years ago John F. Kennedy reminded us that these values were our lasting legacy. Are we to disregard all of that long history out

of right and forget the lesson because we have become complacent and disinterested. On July 3rd 1776 John Adams wrote to his wife the following about the passage of the Declaration of Independence "***I am well aware of the toil, and blood, and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this declaration, and support and defend these states. Yet through the gloom, I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see that the end is more than worth all the means, and that posterity will triumph in that day's transaction.***" So today ,my fellow citizens, as we once again come together to celebrate the birthday of our nation, like John Adams two hundred thirty-four years ago we must see through the gloom and hold to the truths of our heritage by continuing the fight to overcome oppression, in whatever form it might take. We must also resist the temptation to leave governance to the government and preserve the power of the governed over the government, and we must be true to the principles that are enshrined in our National Character. This is our duty as we celebrate the 4th of July and the proper expression of honor to the founders and all who came after them and expressions of honor.