

52nd Annual Independence Day Celebration and Naturalization Ceremony
DMR Keynote Speaker
Monticello
Friday, July 4, 2014

Let me begin by thanking the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, its Chairman Don King and its President Leslie Greene Bowman for honoring me with the invitation to speak to you today at this hallowed and historic site. I am humbled by the invitation, for so many distinguished Americans—all far more distinguished than I—have spoken here on the 4th of July over the past 50 years. I will try to do justice to the tradition they collectively created, and to the legacy of one of the greatest of all Americans, Thomas Jefferson.

Before I start my prepared remarks, I would like to know how many people here have been to this Fourth of July celebration before? How many have been coming for 5 years? 10 years? 15 years? 20 years? 25 years? 30 years? 35 years? 40 years? 45 years? 50 years?

How many have been sworn in as new citizens here?

How many are going to be sworn in today?

How many are proud to be Americans on the 4th of July?

As we gather today, we are really here to celebrate two events that might seem totally unrelated, but in fact are completely related. These events are the 238th birthday of the most extraordinary and most unique country yet conceived by mankind, and the first day in which 73 individuals from 39 other countries will shortly, in front of us, swear their allegiance to this country, and thereby earn forever more the right to proudly say eight words that so many others around the world desperately wish that they could also say: “I am a citizen of the United States.”

Why is it that these two celebrations are actually tied together? And why is it that the grounds on which we now convene are actually the most fitting place in this country to mark these celebrations?

Let me try, as succinctly as I can, to explain why these celebrations, and why this particular setting, are and should be inextricably linked.

The house behind me was designed patiently, with great care and precision, over the course of an adult lifetime, by a Renaissance man the likes of which our country had never seen before, or has seen since, or is likely to ever see again.

That Renaissance man was, of course, Thomas Jefferson, amateur but highly skilled architect, philosopher, scientist, inventor, agronomist, bibliophile, vintner, educator, musician, linguist, and even creator of his own version of the Bible.

Fortunately, all of these diverse pursuits and skills did not come at the expense of Thomas Jefferson's not inconsequential day jobs—Governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, Vice-President of the United States, President of the United States, and—more importantly in Jefferson's view, Founder of the University of Virginia.

But all of those skills and accomplishments—impressive as they are—probably would not have brought us together today.

For it was another skill and another accomplishment of Jefferson's that has actually brought us here on the 4th of July.

Jefferson was an elegant, creative, and gifted writer—and that is apparent to anyone who has read even a few of the more than 18,000 letters of Jefferson's which survive today.

This elegance is perhaps most visible in a document that Jefferson crafted near the end of June in 1776—the Declaration of Independence—a document which eloquently and memorably told the world why this new country had to be created, and what this new country was to be all about.

Jefferson came to this task as a member of the Virginia delegation to the Second Continental Congress. Although only 33 years old at the time, and a relatively new member of the Congress, Jefferson was given the task because his eloquent writing skills were already known to many of his fellow delegates.

Over less than a two week period, working in the evenings from his small rented apartment in Philadelphia, Jefferson produced a draft that, after very modest review by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, was given to the Continental Congress for its approval. The Congress had sought such a document in anticipation of a vote to declare independence from England. It was thought that a public explanation, and justification, of the vote was needed—for the American public, for the American soldiers, for the English government and people, and for the rest of the world.

The vote occurred on July 2, and with that historic vote, the thirteen colonies represented in the Congress by fifty six men agreed to declare independence from England.

On that day, as well as on July 3 and 4, the Congress considered Jefferson's draft of the document that was designed to explain and to justify a vote considered by many to be treasonous.

Most of Jefferson's draft dealt with the offenses committed against the Colonies by King George. At that time this was the only part of the document which other members of the

Congress really spent their time debating, and—to Jefferson’s dismay—changing. Indeed, the other members changed so much of Jefferson’s words that Jefferson felt his hard work had been subject to, in his words, “mutilation.” Jefferson felt so strongly about this mutilation that he did not initially seek to be publicly known as the Declaration’s author, though later in life he asked that his tombstone list this authorship as the first of his lifetime’s accomplishments.

Interestingly, the Congress spent essentially no time changing the Preamble that Jefferson had written. And ironically, this is the only part of the Declaration which is really remembered today. It is remembered because this is the part of the Declaration which has come to symbolize what our country is intended to be all about. Indeed, one sentence of this Preamble has come to be the best known, most quoted and most revered sentence in the English language:

“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.”

What did Jefferson really mean by “all men”—All people? All adult men? All white men? All Christian men? All propertied men? All educated men? All English descended men?

What did Jefferson really mean by “created equal”—Created with equal rights? Created with equal protection? Created with equal opportunities?

We do not really know the answers. In the exactly fifty years that Jefferson lived after writing the Declaration, Jefferson wrote thousands of letters, but he never clarified exactly what he meant by “all men” or by “created equal.”

But future generations of Americans, and freedom-loving citizens around the world, have felt that the words “all men are created equal” explain better than any other five words have ever explained what America—and other democracies—should be about, and indeed must be about.

Yes, Jefferson only used five words, and yes, those five words may have meant many different things at the time that they were written than people later read into them.

But, whatever Jefferson may have exactly meant, the words have been read to mean—as I think they should have been, and as I believe Jefferson really would have wanted them to be—that all people—regardless of gender, sexual preference, color, religion, area of residence, country of origin, family background, wealth, or professional achievement—are entitled in this country, by the force of law, to be afforded equal freedoms, equal protections and equal opportunities.

To be sure, not all people in this country have agreed or still agree on that view of what this country is to be about or what Jefferson really meant when he wrote those extraordinary words. And as a result, this country has seen (and still sees) bitter and protracted internal struggles as we have moved inexorably—and I believe correctly—toward the more inclusive and expansive definition of “all people” and of “created equal.”

As a result of these struggles, and the last full measure of devotion by so many Americans over more than two centuries, we are now far closer to this goal than at any time in our history, and far closer to this goal than any comparable society or country which has ever existed on this earth.

And as we move even closer toward this goal, and ultimately achieve it, we owe a great deal to Thomas Jefferson for first stating so memorably what this country was intended to be, and for so inspiring so many other Americans to try to create a society which actually lives up to those goals.

And it is obviously these goals—and a society which actually embodies them more than any other country on the face of the earth—that for so long have propelled so many citizens of so many other countries to seek to live in this country and, better yet, to become citizens of this country.

And it is these goals—and the recognition of the progress we have made toward achieving them—that have propelled more individuals to seek to become citizens of this country than of any other country in the world.

And it is these goals—and the experiences gained living in this extraordinary country prior to citizenship—that have no doubt propelled all of you who are about to become citizens to eagerly seek to do so.

Those of you who will shortly be taking the oath of citizenship recognize that you will be receiving the most precious commodity that our country can give to anyone in this unrivalled democracy: citizenship—citizenship in a country that Thomas Jefferson helped to conceive—citizenship in a country where you will have, to a greater extent than any other country, the freedom, protections and opportunities that will enable you to pursue your life's desires and ambitions—and citizenship that you can also pass along to your children.

For that, you are no doubt grateful; you are obviously privileged; and you also feel honored.

You should be.

But it is we, the current citizens of this country, who should be grateful to you; it is we who are privileged to have you as fellow citizens; and it is we who are honored that you have chosen our country to bring your own talents, your ambitions, your dreams, and your lives.

We are grateful, and privileged and honored because we know that it is immigrants who have made America the great and unique country which is the clear envy of the free world.

It is, of course, immigrants who built our country. More than any other country in the world, we are the country of immigrants—the country where immigrants can come with nothing but the shirts on their backs, and a burning desire to improve themselves, their families, and ultimately their adopted country.

That is certainly what happened in my own case. My father's father came to this country at the age of ten from Russia (actually Ukraine) in the early part of the 20th century, following anti-Semitic pogroms in that country. He and his parents and siblings had no money, no possessions, no education, no real prospects for a better life.

But they believed that they could create a new life—inspired by the concept that in the United States all people had equal opportunities and equal rights, while also having the right to pursue their religious beliefs without interference.

The life that my grandfather created for my father, and that my father—and mother—created for me could not have been created elsewhere. Whatever I have achieved in life could certainly not have been achieved as readily elsewhere. Whatever I now try to do to give back to my country, I am doing because I am grateful for the blessings this country has bestowed upon me.

I clearly have benefited throughout my life from my own belief that the American dream—first articulated by Thomas Jefferson—can become the American reality. And the benefits that I have received from the American reality are far more than I deserve—and no doubt far more than my immigrant grandfather could have ever anticipated. And that is why I feel so compelled now to give back to my country.

But as the American dream became the American reality for me, so too can this happen to you—as it has for so many others who came before you.

Remember this is the country to which Alexander Graham Bell and Andrew Carnegie immigrated.

This is the country to which Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright immigrated.

This is the country to which Vladimir Horowitz and Isaac Stern immigrated.

This is the country to which Martina Navratilova and Hakeem Olajuwon immigrated.

This is the country to which Saul Bellow and Elie Wiesel immigrated.

This is the country to which Irving Berlin and John Lennon immigrated.

This is the country to which Gloria Estefan and Yo-Yo Ma immigrated.

This is the country to which I.M. Pei and Frank Gehry immigrated.

This is the country to which Andy Grove and Sergey Brin immigrated.

This is the country to which Enrico Fermi and Albert Einstein immigrated.

And let us not forget that this is also the country to which Jane Randolph immigrated as a very young girl; nearly two decades later that immigrant from England gave birth to a baby boy, that she and her husband named Thomas Jefferson. Yes, Thomas Jefferson was the son of an immigrant.

But most importantly for today this is now the country to which a number of you have immigrated.

Perhaps among your midst are individuals who, like some of those I have just named, will change the course of our country's history, or who will produce children who will do so. But even if this does not occur, your mere presence among our citizens will clearly enhance the dynamism, and vibrancy and diversity of our culture, and you will thereby improve our country while hopefully improving your own lives.

So, on behalf of our country's current citizens, let me thank you for what you have done, what you are doing, and will no doubt do in the future to help make America—soon, our shared country—an even better one. You are not in our debt for America's willingness to grant you citizenship. Rather, it is we who are in your debt, for you are helping to revitalize our country; you are bringing new skills, and energy and talents to our country; and you are, by your choice, showing the world that the United States still serves as a beacon of opportunity for all who aspire to a better life—a life where everyone has the chance to be treated equally and fairly.

What act could be more appropriate to the celebration of our country's birthday than the act of new citizens affirming their commitment to the principles underlying our country, principles first written so succinctly, yet so elegantly, in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson?

And what place could be more appropriate to celebrate the birthday, and welcome new citizens to our country, than the home of the man who first told the world the goal for which this country was to be founded?

What more could any of us want on this day where our country's freedom and equality are celebrated?

Perhaps there is just one thing: knowing what Thomas Jefferson himself would say about today's celebration and today's wondrous event. I did not think that I, or anyone, could readily provide that answer—until yesterday.

It was yesterday that I decided to walk down to the cemetery where Thomas Jefferson is buried. I thought that I might get some inspiration for what to say today.

Suddenly, on my iPad an email message appeared. Let me read it to you now.

"I suppose it is self-evident that I cannot physically be with you on this 4th of July. But I can pursue my own means of happiness by sending you this message, which I hope you will convey to others.

"In the 188 years since my death, I have observed with great interest how the Declaration of Independence has come to be viewed, how Monticello has been restored and preserved, and how so much of what I wished our country to become has, after a good many fits and starts, largely come to pass.

"I am delighted with all of these events, and thank the many people—a number of whom are here today—for these positive developments. They bring a nearly three hundred year old man great pleasure, and at that age, pleasurable events do not come along that frequently.

"The lifeblood of our democracy—in my time and now for more than two centuries—has been the energy and fresh ideas brought to our country by new citizens who come to these shores from around the world. So it gives me the greatest of pleasures—even more than the developments I have already mentioned—to have Monticello's grounds used to welcome new

citizens to our country. What more compelling use can there be for any ground in our country than to give birth to new Americans? I built Monticello for other purposes, but none of them transcend in importance the welcoming of new citizens to our country.

“So let me personally congratulate all of those who are about to become citizens. Thank you for joining our country. And thank you for bringing pleasure to me beyond any words that I can convey. Use your citizenship wisely, and I will certainly feel my life was worth the risks and sacrifices involved in helping to create a country where all people should and must be considered and treated equal. In case my choice of words did not make that clear, this is what I always intended—for America.

Enjoy the U.S. and help make it even better.”

Your friend,

Thomas Jefferson

Perhaps there are a few among us who could improve upon the words of Thomas Jefferson. But I am not among them. So let me just conclude by thanking all of you who have come here today to celebrate our country’s birthday, and all of you who have come here today to celebrate your first day as American citizens. And thanks to Thomas Jefferson as well for bringing us together. May God Bless this sacred land and this historic home at which we are so honored and privileged to be today. And May God Bless this country, and the rights and freedoms we hold so dear and to which we are so committed, now and forever more.