

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Office of the Vice President  
(Washington, D. C.)

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REMARKS OF THE VICE PRESIDENT  
AT THE  
"READING IS FUNDAMENTAL" CEREMONY  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

(AT 1:50 P.M. EDT)

Thank you very much, indeed, John Chancellor; and to Mr. John Warner, who is the Administrator of the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission; to Mrs. McNamara; Dr. Rhodes; Mayor Washington, when he gets here; to all of these distinguished guests; members of the cabinet; distinguished officials of the international bodies, and to the young people who are sitting in the front row -- I would like to comment it is Danny's birthday; it is a special celebration for him -- and to all of you who are here:

I can't imagine a more perfect matching of a time, a place and an event. We are gathered here to watch the Bicentennial Project of "Reading is Fundamental." What better time than today, Constitution Day, what better place than here where the documents of our American heritage are preserved. More than anything else, it was the power of the written word that fired the imagination of our forebearers, the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist papers, the Constitution, the words of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Tom Paine, that transformed colonies into a free people, and the colonies into a great nation.

Above all, our founding fathers wanted to establish a land of equal opportunity. Opportunity was the most powerful magnet that attracted millions of men and women to these shores. Some brought skills; some brought talents; most brought little more than their bare hands and a deep yearning to build better lives for themselves and for their families.

They took their chances eagerly in a raw, new alien world. They seized the opportunities at hand and made the most of them and, in so doing, they built this great nation.

But there is something vastly different in the America that they settled and the America of today.

In our country's infant years, people could make it literally by the sweat of their brow. There were forests to clear, roads to build, canals to dig. There was endless market for muscle, for sheer energy.

Today, we live in a sophisticated, complex, intellectually demanding society. The person without functional literacy is at an insurmountable disadvantage in the competition of everyday life.

Our nation has complex problems to solve in energy, in the economy, in the environment. We needed the minds,

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disciplinary thinkers, and imaginations that are stirred by the contact with new ideas. And in all of this, reading is fundamental.

I have faith in this country and I am optimistic about our future. I believe that our nation has unique assets.

For one, we have people who care, not only about themselves but about others. We have people like these young Americans on the platform who are beginning to make something of themselves. We have a long history of civic-minded responsible citizens who give freely of their time, their energy and their own responsibilities and resources to help others.

We have people like Margaret McNamara, who exemplifies this spirit.

Ten years ago, Mrs. McNamara volunteered her services as a teacher's assistant to help children to learn to read in this city. What she discovered gave her cause for concern. Not only were many children not reading and not interested in reading, but many of them never saw a book outside of the classroom.

Most of their homes were without books, so Mrs. McNamara started a program called "Reading is Fundamental." Her idea was to motivate children to read, to get them to want to read. She wisely took advantage of two basic human desires -- freedom of choice and pride of ownership. "Reading is Fundamental" lets children choose what they want to read, books that seem like fun, and the program lets them keep paperback editions of these books. For many of these children, these books are the first they have ever owned. Mrs. McNamara started this program as an experiment. It certainly has been an overwhelmingly successful experiment.

Today, over 400 similar programs are operating in 46 States. Most of the work is done by volunteers -- in the tradition of most great American movements.

I wish I could say that every community has the "Reading is Fundamental" program. Recently, I came upon some figures which explained why. One literacy study reports that about 21 million Americans aged 16 and over cannot read something as basic as a want ad.

Just think of that figure in terms of people trying to better themselves by finding a job.

What would the documents in this historic building have meant if many Americans had not been able to read them and be moved by them? Democracy and literacy go hand in hand. And literacy and opportunity also go hand in hand.

Jefferson put it best when he said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

Thanks to the dedication of people like Mrs. McNamara and all her fellow supporters, we do recognize that reading is

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fundamental, and as long as we raise a new generation of readers, our hearts and our minds and our nation will stay free.

Thank you very much.

END (AT 2 P.M. EDT)