

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Washington

The Bicentennial Speeches of  
Gerald R. Ford

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TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
TO BE DELIVERED AT MONTICELLO

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA

July 5, 1976

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I am proud to welcome you as fellow citizens of the United States of America.

I invite you to join fully in the American adventure and to share our common goal and our common glory.

Our common goal is freedom -- the liberty of each individual to enjoy the equal rights and to pursue the happiness which, in this life, God gives and self-government secures.

Our common glory is the great heritage from the past which enriches our present and ensures our future.

In 1884 France, as a birthday gift, presented the United States with the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. This year scores of friendly nations have sent us Bicentennial gifts which we deeply appreciate and will long cherish.

But you have given us a birthday present beyond price -- yourselves, your faith, your loyalty and your love. We thank you with full and friendly hearts.

After two centuries there is still something wonderful about being an American. If we cannot quite express it, we know what it is -- you know what it is or you would not be here.

Why not just call it 'patriotism?'

Thomas Jefferson was a Virginia planter, a politician, a philosopher, a practical problem-solver, a Palladian architect and a poet in prose. With such genius he became a Burgess, a Delegate, a Governor, an Ambassador, a Secretary of State, a Vice President and a President of the United States.

But he was, first of all, a patriot.

The American patriots of 1776 who pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to declare and defend our Independence did more than dissolve their ties with another country to protest abuse of their liberties.

Jefferson and his colleagues very deliberately and daringly set out to construct a new kind of nation.

'Men may be trusted,' he said, 'to govern themselves without a master.'

This was the most revolutionary idea in the world at that time. It remains the most revolutionary idea in the world today.

Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison and all patriots who laid the foundation for freedom in our Declaration and our Constitution carefully studied both contemporary and classical models of government to adapt them to the American climate and circumstances. Just as Jefferson did in designing Monticello, they wanted to build in this beautiful land a home for equal freedom and opportunity, a haven of safety and happiness -- not for themselves alone but for all who would come to us through the centuries.

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How well they built is told by millions upon millions who came, and are still coming.

Our first national census in 1790 recorded a population just under 4 million. Three-fourths of them traced their ancestry to the British Isles, though most had considered themselves Americans for several generations. There was already talk that further immigration should be selective and restricted, but this was swept aside by the greatest mass movement of people in all human history.

Immigrants came from almost everywhere, singly and in waves. Throughout our first century they brought the restless drive for better lives and the rugged strength that cleared the wilderness, plowed the prairie, and tamed the western plains, pushing on into the Pacific and Alaska.

Like the Mayflower Pilgrims and the early Spanish settlers, these new Americans brought with them precious relics of the worlds they left behind: a song, a story, a dance -- a tool, a recipe, a seed -- the name of a place, the rules of a game, a trick of the trade.

Such transfusions of traditions and cultures as well as of blood have made America unique among nations and Americans a new kind of people. There is little the world has that is not native to the United States today.

Unfettered by ancient hates, the people of the young United States really believed that "all men are created equal". We admit they had stubborn blind spots in their lofty vision -- for blacks, whose forebears had been Americans almost as long as theirs -- and for women, whose political rights we took even longer to recognize.

This is not the day, however, to deplore our shortcomings, or to regret that not all new citizens have been welcomed the way you are today. The essential fact is that the United States -- as a national policy, and in the hearts of most Americans -- has been willing to absorb anyone, from anywhere. We were confident that, simply by sharing our American adventure, these newcomers would become loyal, law-abiding productive citizens. And they did.

Older nations in the 18th and 19th centuries granted their nationality to the foreign-born only as a special privilege, if at all. We offered citizenship to all, and we have been richly rewarded.

The United States was able to do this because we are uniquely a community of values, as distinct from a religious community, a racial community, a geographic community or an ethnic community. This nation was founded, 200 years ago, not on ancient legends or conquests, or physical likeness or language, but on certain political values which Jefferson's pen so eloquently expressed.

To be an American is to subscribe to those principles which the Declaration of Independence proclaims and the Constitution protects: the political values of self-government, liberty and justice, equal rights and equal opportunity.

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These beliefs are the secret of America's unity from diversity -- in my judgment, the most magnificent achievement of our 200 years as a nation.

"Black is beautiful" was a motto of genius which uplifted us far above its first intention. Once Americans had thought about it and perceived its truth, we began to realize that so are brown, white, red and yellow beautiful.

When I was young, a Sunday School teacher told us that the beauty of Joseph's coat was its many colors.

I believe Americans are beautiful -- individually, in communities, and freely joined together by dedication to the United States of America.

I see a growing danger to this country in conformity of thought and taste and behaviour. We need more encouragement and protection for individuality. The wealth we have of cultural, ethnic, religious and racial traditions are valuable counterbalances to the overpowering sameness and subordination of totalitarian societies.

The sense of belonging to any group that stands for something decent and noble, so long as it does not confine free spirits or cultivate hostility to others, is part of the pride every American should have in the heritage of his past.

That heritage is rooted now not in England alone, indebted as we are for Magna Carta and the common law; not in Europe alone or in Africa alone or in Asia or the islands of the sea. The American adventure draws from the best of all mankind's long sojourn here on Earth and now reaches out into the solar system.

You came as strangers among us and you leave here citizens, equal in fundamental rights, equal before the law, with an equal share in the promise of the future.

Jefferson did not define what the pursuit of happiness means for you or for me. Our Constitution does not guarantee that any of us will find it. But we are free to try.

Foreigners like Lafayette and Von Steuben and Pulaski came to fight in our Revolution because they believed its principles were universal. Immigrants like Andrew Carnegie came as a poor boy and created a great steel industry, then gave his fortune back to America for libraries, universities and museums. Maria Francesca Cabrini came as a missionary Sister to serve the sick and the poor. Samuel Gompers worked in a sweatshop and spent his lunchtime helping other immigrant workers learn to read so they could become citizens. We have gained far more than we have given to the millions who made America their second homeland.

Remember that none of us are more than caretakers of this great country. Remember that the more freedom you give to others, the more you will have for yourself. Remember that without law, there can be no liberty.

And remember, as well, the rich treasures you brought with you from whence you came, and let us share your pride in them.

This is the way we keep our Independence as exciting as the day it was declared, and the United States of America even more beautiful than Joseph's coat.