

Remarks on the Charters of Freedom Project

July 1, 1999

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. As you might imagine, this is a very special day for Hillary and for me, in a signal honor for us to have the chance to serve at this moment. I want to thank John Carlin for his faithful stewardship of these great documents; thank my friend Mike Armstrong for his generosity and for calling on others in the business community to help in this endeavor; thank Secretary Riley and NASA and the Department of Commerce for working with the National Archives in designing and developing the new encasement that will house our charters. I thank the Center for Civic Education for their efforts to teach our children the importance of history.

I'd like to thank these young people who are here who read—first they helped us recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then they read from our founding documents. And I thought that young man did a remarkable job introducing Hillary. I thought they were all great. Let's give them a hand. [*Applause*]

And I would like to say a special word of appreciation to Congressman Ralph Regula for his leadership and for proving that this is one issue which is not a partisan issue. This is an American issue. And I'm very grateful to him for his leadership in the United States Congress on this.

On July 4, 1776, King George of England wrote in his diary, "Nothing of importance happened today." Now, even making allowances for the absence of world news and the Internet, His Majesty's diary entry stands as one of the more inaccurate statements ever written. [*Laughter*] We all know that those who put their names to the Declaration of Independence changed the world forever.

Before then, liberty had been a rare and fleeting thing in the course of human history. Citizens of ancient democracies enjoyed it but let it slip from their grasp. So the Founders labored mightily to craft a Declaration of Independence, then a Constitution and a Bill of Rights that they hoped would help America to beat the odds and keep liberty alive.

Two hundred and twenty-three years later we can safely say they succeeded not only in keeping the liberty they created, in fact, alive, but in moving ever closer, generation after generation, to the pure ideals embodied in the words they wrote.

Today, our liberty extends not just to white men with property but to all Americans. Our concept of freedom no longer includes the so-called freedom to keep slaves or extract profit from the labor of children. And our Constitution is the inspiration behind scores of democratic governments around the world, from Japan to Poland to Guatemala to South Africa.

Each generation of Americans is called upon not only to preserve that liberty but to enhance it; not only to protect the institutions that secure our liberty but to renew and reform them to meet the challenges of the present with an eye for the future. The renewal of our generation—in our economy, our social fabric, our world leadership for peace and freedom—is well symbolized by the project we celebrate today, employing the finest minds and latest technologies to preserve these charters of freedom for generations yet unborn.

When Hillary and I first realized that the turn of the millennium would occur while we were in the White House, we knew we had an obligation to mark it in ways that would be good for the country—in her words, "by honoring the past and imagining the future."

What we do with these hallowed pieces of parchment, all Americans can do with the important historical treasures that exist all around them, in their attics, their parks, their townhalls. Saving America's treasures is not about living in the past. It is about conveying to future generations the American story in all its texture and richness and detail, about fulfilling our duty to be good ancestors, about catching the spirit Thomas Jefferson had in his later years, when he became devoted to preserving desks and chairs and other ordinary things from his extraordinary times. "These small things," he wrote, "may perhaps, like the relics of Saints, help to nourish our devotion to this holy bond of Union and keep it longer alive and warm in our affections."

I want to thank, first and foremost, Hillary for leading this effort, which has already accomplished so much, from restoring the Star-Spangled Banner to honoring our great artists, thinkers, and scientists. I look forward to walking on some of those 2,000 Millennium Trails we'll build together, and to naming more and more Millennium Communities.

We can all take pride in our efforts to renew our national treasures, for in a larger sense, the story of our Nation is the story of constant renewal, the realization that we preserve the ideals embodied in these documents not simply by revering them but by reaffirming our commitment to them. Each generation must widen the circle of opportunity, deepen the meaning of freedom, and strengthen the bonds of our community.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." We fought a war of revolution to make those words real in 1776. We rededicated ourselves to that proposition in 1863, recognizing that the bright words of the Declaration could not abide the stain of slavery or endure the breaking of our Union. We rededicated ourselves at the coming of the industrial age, when we recognized that new measures were required to protect and advance equal opportunity and freedom. We rededicated ourselves again in 1920, when we ratified the 19th amendment, granting women the right to vote. We saved those ideals in World War II and for millions upon millions of people in the cold war. We rededicated ourselves again in 1963, hearing and heeding Dr. King's dream that one day, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners would one day sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Today, at the coming of the information age, we rededicate ourselves yet again. Thank God our challenges are not those of depression or war, but those brought on by this hopeful and remarkable explosion in technology, by the globalization of our economy, by all the changes in the way we work and live and relate to each other and the rest of the world.

To keep our ideals alive, we must embrace new ideas and follow a new course. Because we believe equal opportunity in 1999 is just

as important as it was in 1776, we must rededicate ourselves to the truest guarantor of that opportunity, a world-class educational system that benefits every single child.

Because we believe the Federal Government must promote the general welfare, as our Founders instructed, we are dedicated to using its resources to pay squarely our single, greatest challenge as a nation today, the aging of America, and to do so in a way that pays off our national debt for the first time since 1835.

Because we believe every human being has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and no one should be discriminated against, uprooted, abused, or killed because of his or her race or ethnic background or religion, we are proud to stand with our Allies in defense of these ideals in Kosovo.

It is natural for any American contemplating the documents behind me to look upon those who crafted them as almost superhuman in their wisdom and the times that they lived as a golden age. But the more you read about them, the more you respect their achievement because the Founders were not gods on Earth; they were farmers and lawyers, printers and merchants, surveyors and soldiers, chosen by their constituents to hash out divergent interests and make difficult decisions about the future—to engage, in other words, in politics.

I said at my alma mater, Georgetown, last week, that at its best, politics is about values, ideas, and action. That's what they were about. They turned politics into public service and made it a noble endeavor and left us a framework to keep it going. The Declaration and the Constitution emerged only after fierce debate and difficult compromise. Today, these documents enjoy universal acclaim. And at the time they were written, believe it or not, many Americans—though, thank goodness not a majority—actually did not agree with them.

Yet, the Framers refused to let serious differences of opinion become excuses to put off action. They overcame their differences and completed their tasks and stayed true to an idea that Jefferson would later express in his first Inaugural, that every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.