



*Speech delivered by U.S. Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. George N. Sibley at the Hilton Hotel, Antananarivo, Madagascar on the 231<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 2007.*

**[Welcoming remarks to the assembled dignitaries]**

It is a tremendous honor and a pleasure to host you all on this festive occasion. It is a day to mark with pride, with humility, and with hope.

I begin with pride.

Two hundred and thirty one years ago, the Declaration of Independence was unanimously affirmed by the thirteen colonies of America and adopted by the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. I am sure the Founding Fathers did not do then, what I did this year, when they set about to draft this document that shifted the axis of history. They did not log in to their computers and do a Google search on “Independence.”

Some may question whether this is progress, but it is the reality of today, and it certainly made my job much easier. On the internet I found a link to my own institution, the State Department, and found an article posted there from last year’s Independence Day. Here is its opening paragraph:

“The United States celebrates its Independence Day on July 4, a day of patriotic celebration and family events throughout the country. In the words of Founding Father John Adams, the holiday would be “the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, . . . . It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.”

All this is true. It is a day of ceremony and celebration, a day of pomp and – perhaps too often – pomposity. So please forgive me if I stray toward the latter, but for me this has always been a day of remembrance as well. It is important to celebrate, but it is more important to remember why we are celebrating.

America’s national day is notable in that we celebrate a “declaration” and not some glorious battle in our fight for freedom. That is because this declaration expresses our deepest values. Thomas Jefferson laid the foundation of our democracy 231 years ago when he wrote:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”

These are the words and, far more important, these are the ideals that we must remember today. Their power lies in their very simplicity: That we all, each and every one of us, have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that government, springing from the consent of the governed, is entrusted above all to secure these rights.

This is not a vision of the past, a document brought up from a dusty archive. These are not quaint ideals to be revered by historians and forgotten by citizens. This is the soul of who we are today and this is the map of where we should go tomorrow. Further, this is a universal guide, not just an American one. Perhaps that sounds arrogant, but let me ask you: what people in all the world does not want life, liberty and the freedom to pursue their happiness? What citizens in all the world do not want a government that guarantees these rights for them? And what citizens do not despise that government that steals these rights and represses these aspirations?

I spoke a moment ago of remembrance. Remembering these goals and these high ideals is the first step. This is the step of pride I spoke of a moment ago. These are noble ideals and we can be rightfully proud to stand for them

The step of humility, however, comes next. Because, sadly, no government, however well-intentioned, can ever achieve the pure nobility of that idea. No, not in America and not in Madagascar – not anywhere.

Let me quote at some length from one of the most stirring speeches about the Fourth of July ever delivered. The speaker said:

“Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold it in perpetual remembrance. I have said that 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 cost.”

But then this great citizen went on...

“I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.”

The author of these words was Frederick Douglass, born a slave in America, and they were delivered in 1852, when slavery was still the law of the land.

Herein lies the humility that I spoke of, and the sorrow, when we must contemplate how often in our history we have fallen far, far short of the lofty goals to which we aspire.

However, it also brings us to the final message, which is hope.

The United States fought a devastating war before African Americans like Frederick Douglass could be free. Our women – half the population of the land! --did not obtain the right to vote until 1920, less than a hundred years ago. Today however, a woman, an African American woman, Condoleezza Rice, is our Secretary of State and my boss.

The lesson here is that change is possible. The message of hope states that today's injustice can be redressed, today's poverty can become tomorrow's prosperity, today's tyranny can become tomorrow's democracy. But this is only possible with honest self-appraisal and great effort. I return to Frederick Douglass:



“We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to enjoy a child's share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your labors.”

Looking today at Madagascar as a friend and as a partner, I think of these words. Much that I see reinforces the great hope that Madagascar is working now for a brighter future. The Madagascar Action Plan is full of ambitious goals. If these goals are achieved, the people of Madagascar will have a better life, greater liberty, and far vaster scope to pursue their happiness. The United States, on this day to celebrate our independence, promises to help you to achieve these goals. In our programs to improve health and the environment, in promoting education and fighting corruption, we will help you to achieve these goals. With every part of our Mission, from our Peace Corps to the Defense Attaché's Office, from USAID to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, we will stand with you in friendship as you seek to achieve a better life for the people of this nation.

I also hope that the processes to ensure the consent of the governed may be improved in the months ahead. In the past year you have held an important election and your president has won a great victory. Now is the time for political reforms, to consider a stronger Electoral Commission and the single ballot system that is becoming the norm throughout the world. Again, I say this as a friend and as a partner.

In conclusion, as we celebrate our Fourth of July and the foundation of our own democracy, I extend best wishes to the people of Madagascar in their own recent national celebration. May the coming year bring our two great nations ever closer together in friendship and in brotherhood.

Misaotra indrindra Tompoko noho ny faharetanareo.