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**“A Muslim Link to America’s Founding Fathers”
Op-ed by U.S. Ambassador James D. McGee**

On an historic occasion in Washington D.C. January 4, incoming Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison became the first Muslim member of the U.S. Congress. Mr. Ellison took his oath of office on a copy of the Quran that belonged to the author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Congressman Ellison’s gesture emphasizes that religious tolerance in America dates back more than two centuries.

Jefferson obtained the English translation of the Quran in 1765 while a law student at the College of William and Mary, and it remained in his personal library until it was moved to the Library of Congress. In addition to the famous Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which later served as a basis for the religion clauses in the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights. Jefferson recognized that religious tolerance was a source of strength for a nation.

He wrote, “civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions,” and “denying a person the ability to hold an office of trust or declaring him unworthy of public confidence based on his religious beliefs is a violation of natural rights.”

Two hundred years later, Congressman Ellison embodies the wisdom of Jefferson’s words. American religious tolerance remains a work in progress, but there can be no doubt it makes our country stronger.

James D. McGee