



**Independence Day Exercises
Monticello
11 A.M. July 4, 2001
Address by Vartan Gregorian**

Trustees of Thomas Jefferson Foundation, President Dan Jordan, Chairman Brent Halsey, Bishop Atkinson, Judge Thomas, Judge Turk, your colleagues at the Western District Court, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, distinguished guests, families, friends and my fellow immigrants--both young and old:

Happy Fourth of July to you all!

It is a great privilege and honor for us to celebrate the 225th anniversary of America's independence at the home of President Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence.

Today we are not celebrating the birth of our country alone, but a powerful revolutionary idea, too. It is worth repeating: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights--that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

We are celebrating our Constitution, which was envisaged as an instrument at the disposal of its people to "form a more perfect union...and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." The Constitution, with its checks and balances, has enabled us, over time, to abolish slavery, extend voting rights to women, expand the scope of civil rights and human rights, uphold equal opportunity and equity, broaden our First Amendment rights, strengthen the foundations of our legal and social justice systems, and open our country's doors to immigrants. Since today we are also celebrating the institution of citizenship, its rights and its obligations, it is a singular honor for me to address those of you who are to be naturalized as U.S. citizens. As of today, you will formally join the United States, a nation of nations, and a microcosm of all of humanity.

You come from 35 countries, ranging from Argentina to Vietnam. You represent five continents. The names of your homelands alone conjure up a fabulous tapestry of colors, races, faiths and ethnic groups. You embody so many cultures, so much history, so much civilization. And you have brought all that as gifts to America, your new country.

I am a first-generation American. I was born in Tabriz, Iran. Today, I fondly recall the winter day, 22 years ago, when I stood in your place--an immigrant waiting anxiously to become a naturalized citizen. I was, not unlike you, full of joy, fears, trepidation and hope. It was another historical setting, the Philadelphia Federal Court House, just steps away from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell.

At that ceremony, I spoke on behalf of the new citizens of the United States. Since those remarks still resonate with me, I thought it appropriate to share some of them with you on this wonderful occasion. We, America's newest citizens, are immigrants like our forefathers who founded this nation of nations. We come from dozens of countries, from many cultures, from many continents, many faiths, many colors, many languages, many accents, many races. We come from different social and

economic backgrounds and from different political persuasions. Whether we came to the United States for economic opportunity, political or religious asylum, education, security or reunification with our families and relatives, we all share a common faith in this country.

No matter how you define democracy--whether it is a government of the people, by the people and for the people or as a system where, according to Alexander Hamilton, the people are said to be masters of their own destiny and fate--the American proposition has always been that free people can be trusted to know what's good for them.

We share the vision of Walt Whitman that democracy is the essence of American spirit and the purpose of America's existence. For Whitman, democracy's aim was, is and must be, the perfection of human beings-- a kind of training school for making first-class men and women, who live lives of love and noble aspiration. "The United States, he said, themselves are essentially the greatest poem."

We share Woodrow Wilson's notion of democracy: that it exists for the purpose of reducing inhumanity and maximizing hope. That particular quality of democracy creates a principle recognizing the dignity of all human beings and legally guaranteeing the political equality of the individual.

That principle helps to create a society that aims to provide political, social and economic opportunity for all men and women. Democracy, then, is morally of a higher order than other political systems because it institutionalizes freedom, opportunity, dignity, justice and hope.

We share the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt and his view that freedom in American democracy must include the freedom from want, freedom from insecurity and freedom from fear. For him, democracy was the embodiment of human dignity, freedom, autonomy and self-determination.

We share the vision of James Madison and his belief that the rights of individuals and those in the minority are better protected in a diverse society because even those in the ruling majority, by necessity, must represent a combination of interests and perspectives. In a free government, the security of civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. We share Madison's vision of a country built on diversity and its motto, E Pluribus Unum--out of many, one. This is a land where faiths, cultures, races, and hundreds of ethnic groups coexist.

We share the vision of Herman Melville that "We are not a narrow tribe of men. No, our blood is that of the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents, all pouring into one. We are not a nation, so much as a world."

We the newest citizens in the U.S., like so many of our immigrant ancestors, have come not only to enjoy the benefits of America but to work for its development and welfare. We have come to lend a hand in reaching out for democracy's ideals. We have come to share its legacy and mission and to contribute to that "perfect union."

We know America is not perfect but we see it as perfectible. For us, America is not just a past, it is also a future. It is not just an actuality--it is always a potentiality. America's greatness lies in the fact that all its citizens, both new and old, have an opportunity to work for that potentiality, for its unfinished agenda.

We the citizens know that the American dream is not only about making money, advancing in careers or finding opportunity. We know that above all, the American dream is about living in a land that has a profound respect for human dignity, freedom, and for men's and women's potentialities. Throughout American history, we have seen repeated commitments to that faith and those principles.

Thomas Jefferson believed that nature has given to all men a right to depart from the country in which chance, not choice has placed them and to seek "public happiness" in other societies and places where there are more appropriate laws. We have all chosen the United States for its ideals, its rights and its institutions. We have chosen it in order to be part of its historical struggle and quest for human dignity, freedom, and social justice.

Twenty-two years ago I concluded my remarks by paying tribute to Thomas Wolfe's confident vision that, "The true fulfillment of our spirit, of our might, and immortal lamp is yet to come..." that, "...the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us--and that all these things are certain, as certain as the morning and as inevitable as the noon."

Today, I would like to close by quoting Thomas Jefferson--for July Fourth is, more than any other time, a day to honor him. In 1826, he was asked to give a July 4th speech in Washington, D.C., commemorating the 50th anniversary of the event that helped define all of our lives. Being gravely ill, he declined the invitation, but wrote a statement to be read in Washington. It included this passage:

"All eyes are opened or are opening to the rights of men. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth--that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others; for ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."

As his words were being read in Washington, Jefferson died here at Monticello at 12:30 in the afternoon-- almost 50 years to the moment that the Declaration of Independence was introduced at the Continental Congress. Jefferson's last conscious words, spoken the prior evening, was a question: "Is it the Fourth?"

Yes it is, Mr. President. And today, these new citizens join generations of Americans to thank you and your incomparable colleagues for making this day possible for our nation and the world.