

**Keynote Remarks at Evening in Celebration of
“One Nation Under God”**

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Thank you very much. It is a great honor and more than a little intimidating to be asked to serve as the keynote speaker for this event. It all gives me better appreciation for a classic Yogi Berra moment. For you high school students, Yogi Berra is not a cartoon character but a baseball star who played in a record 14 World Series for the New York Yankees from 1947-63. And, he was famous for misspeaking in memorable ways at key moments. One moment was much like this one, a grand public affair in New York, where Yogi was the featured speaker. The mayor’s wife—seeing Yogi who at least appeared calm—made a comment to him about how cool he looked. With internal anxiety actually getting the best of him, he nervously replied, “well, you don’t look so hot yourself.”¹

As I begin tonight, I think it important to stress that I speak to you not in any official capacity, representing some kind of state or institutional position. Rather, I stand before you as a simple citizen exercising that cherished right of all Americans to speak freely. In invoking such a right, I also introduce the focus of my brief remarks. The invocation of this right raises some critical questions, namely what is the source of such a right and are there any responsibilities attendant to this right, and other rights like it? While the answers to these questions may never have been settled in perfect detail, certainty, and unanimity in this country, it does seem that, especially lately, we are getting foggier rather than clearer about such answers. Thus, far from

¹ Berra, Y. (1998). *The Yogi Book: “I Really Didn’t Say Everything I Said!”* New York, NY: Workman Publishing, p. 54.

offering some comprehensive and definitive answers myself, I only wish tonight to call our attention to some great figures from our past to whom we might constantly look in order to reduce the fog and point us forward in what must be our ongoing quest for greater and greater understanding about such matters.

When the founders of America strode onto the stage of human history, they inhabited a world long engrained in the thought and practice of two quite different perspectives concerning the nature of law and government. One perspective stemmed from centuries and centuries of practice in various tribes and kingdoms and regimes, buttressed in various forms by the thought of figures as venerated as ancient Greece's Plato and modern England's King James of Bible fame. The core idea from this tradition was that there existed "natural rulers," people in the world people designated to rule, either because they were appointed by some divine power, or because they were naturally so much wiser and capable than everyone else. The foundation of government, then, was to make sure that these natural rulers got in power, stayed in power, and were obeyed.

The other perspective the founders faced was one defended by very few thinkers but practiced everywhere and all too often, from the dawn of history to the present, by men and women of ambition. Actually, there is at least one thinker who appears to defend this particular perspective and defends it with such clarity and brilliance that his name has become a convenient label for this perspective, that label is Machiavellian. In the early 1500's, Nicolo Machiavelli wrote a short handbook of advice to a ruling family in Italy, arguing, without a hint of regret or embarrassment, that politics is not subject to any moral requirements higher than getting and keeping power. In other words, anything is justified—large scale theft, deception of all forms, cold blooded murder (even of close relatives)—if it will help a ruler secure his or her kingdom.

The founders of America were, by and large, men of great ambition. They were not immune to the siren call of fame and fortune, and demonstrated many of the human frailties that infect us all. But, to their great credit and our good fortune, they were decidedly not Machiavellian. Quite the contrary, they did believe, and believed energetically, that law and government and politics did answer to something higher than simply the art of getting and keeping power. That is, they believed there existed certain, self-evident moral ideals, not of human making, that were true across time and space, that gave shape to what law and political leaders could justly do.

What are some of those truths? We need look no further than the Declaration of Independence for the clearest and most poetic expression of some of those truths, the first of them being that “all men are created equal.” By this one declaration alone, Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues in the Continental Congress of 1776 not only contradict Machiavelli’s evil view that there are no moral truths governing politics, but they explode the other perspective I just explained which had also held a long, broad grip on civilization. By declaring that it is true that “all men are created equal” the founders were declaring that no man has a God-given, or natural, claim to rule over another. One may in fact possess superior physical, intellectual or spiritual talents compared to others, but one is not entitled to rule over those others just because of those superior talents. Said another way, there are no natural rulers, but there are natural rights, namely rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, rights which collectively assert that all men are naturally free to govern themselves. In many respects, this was a new idea in the world, something the founders were somehow able to see and discover despite several millennia of teaching and practices that emphasized the opposite.

Here it is important to stress, though, that they did not see this as just some novel idea

that they made up and liked and would work to their advantage, it was an idea they took to be self-evidently true, something that always had been true, and always would be true, whatever they did or said. It was, they asserted, a truth emanating from something higher than themselves, something transcendent and eternal. These founders were not granting these rights to the American people, rather they were simply revealing rights that Americans, like all men and all women everywhere, had always had, for these were rights emanating from the “the laws of nature and of nature’s god” as indicated in the very first sentence of the Declaration, or, as indicated in the second sentence, these were rights “endowed by their Creator.”

Alexander Hamilton was not a signer of the Declaration but he was very much a central player in the founding of this great republic. He put it this way,

The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchment or musty records. They are written as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by moral power. . . . The Supreme Being gave existence to man, together with the means of preserving and beautifying that existence. He endowed him rational faculties, by which he could discern and pursue such things as were consistent with his duty and interest, and invested him with an inviolable right to personal liberty and personal safety.²

It is important, even vital, that Americas do more of the kind of thing we are doing tonight, that is celebrating what is now an old idea for us, that basic rights of individual freedom are not just something that come from an enlightened and generous founding generation, but they are inextricably tied to divinity. Now, the founders themselves had some widely varying ideas about the nature of this divinity. And the rank and file Americans who embraced what the founders had to say about rights, and took up arms to defend the principle, were even more diverse in their religious views—some views which could be at odds with those held by many in attendance this evening. There is nothing about what I have said here tonight that would

² Alexander Hamilton, “The Farmer Refuted,” (February, 1775); Hamilton, J. C. (Ed.). (1851). *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2. New York: Charles S. Francis, p. 80.

privilege one particular religious society above another in our republic. Nor is there anything here that would call for uncivil treatment of, or a restriction of liberty for, those who do not believe in God. To do any of those things would be a violation of the very God-given ideals for which the Revolutionary generation fought. But there is a caution here for us today. It is a caution Jefferson himself expressed in the only book he ever published, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. As he put it,

Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated by with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever. . . .³

The problem of failing to see these rights as something permanent and true, rooted in something higher than man himself, something divine, something we all might call God even if we have some differing ideas about this God, is that they then become, at best, gifts of the state, gifts that a state can then take or give or change as it sees fit without qualm. This would grant the state just the kind of scope of power that the founders thought was fundamentally unjust and horrifically dangerous. As George Washington once said, “Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master.”⁴ If we completely erase from our culture a conviction that godly truths of freedom exist, we lose a critical bulwark in keeping the fires of government banked and channeled into a powerful instrument of good, making it that much easier for it to break out of control and consume everything in its wake.

The reminder here seems timely. Thanks to the power, insight and eloquence of the founders, we seem to face little danger to today that we will soon slip back into ancient doctrines that some people are designated by god or nature to rule over others. And even now, five

³ Koch, A. & Peden, W. (Eds.). (1993). *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. New York, NY: Random House, p. 258.

⁴ As quoted in Sinclair, U. (1915). *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*. New York, NY: Barricade Books, p. 305.

hundred years later, very few are likely to outdo Machiavelli's point-blank claim that there is no such thing as morality, therefore do whatever you have to do to get and keep power. But what we do face today is a third perspective, a growing set of doctrines and philosophies and attitudes that seem to embrace the importance of individual rights at some level even as they suggest that these rights are, at most, brilliant constructions of the mortal mind. But this is indeed a house "built upon the sand."⁵ It is a position that appears more humane and moral and freedom loving than Machiavellianism for sure, but not one likely to stand the test of time, given what we know about the fickleness of the human mind and popular opinion.

Severing our basic claims to freedom from something eternal and divine presents another challenge. Edmund Burke, the great English philosopher and statesman who argued in favor of American independence, famously taught that "men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites."⁶ Washington, had just this notion in mind when he gave his Farewell Address to the nation. Having "grown grey and nearly blind in the service of his country," this the greatest of our founding fathers was turning down a third term of office despite the hue and cry that he remain in power. And, he was taking this moment to offer a final public statement concerning those things he thought were most critical for the young nation to embrace in order to preserve their new found liberties.

Towards the end of this now classic text, Washington says,

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained

⁵ Matthew 7:26

⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 4. (1866). Waltham, Mass: Little Brown, pp. 51-52.

without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.⁷

And so it is “altogether fitting and proper” that we meet tonight and celebrate the notion of a nation of “under God.” For, as our founders realized, a nation that critically understands that its most basic and cherished rights are expressions of the eternal and divine, and that living godly principles of honesty, humility, moderation and love are powerful restraints on the very excesses of human nature likely to undo any regime of freedom, then this will be a nation where the sacred fires of liberty cannot be quenched. And so, with charity and liberty for all, including those who do not share such beliefs, let us be loyal to the vision of our founders and the hopes of our posterity, by celebrating in action, in word, and in song, that we are, indeed, a “nation under God.”

⁷ Allen, W. B. (Ed.). (1988). *George Washington: A Collection*. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, p. 521.