

# A few words about freedom, respect, and obligations

*I want to share with you some excerpts from my remarks at our July 4 celebration at Archives I along the National Mall.*

We honor today, on this Fourth of July/ Independence Day, the surviving veterans of our parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' war, the Second World War.

Sixty-five years ago, on the first Fourth of July since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war, most Americans and all Government agencies put in a normal day's work. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's address to the nation that day said it best:

"Never since it first was created in Philadelphia has this anniversary come in times so dangerous to everything for which it stands. We celebrate it this year, not in the fireworks of make-believe but in the death-dealing reality of tanks and planes and guns and ships.

"We celebrate it also by running without interruption the assembly lines which turn out these weapons to be shipped to all the embattled points of the globe. . . .

"To the weary, hungry, unequipped army of the American Revolution, the Fourth of July was a tonic of hope and inspiration. So is it now. . . ."

Allow me to welcome to our neighborhood representatives of the Catholic and Protestant parties who have just formed the new coalition government in Northern Ireland and effectively begun to put an end to the decades of bitter violence in that land. They are gathered only a few blocks from here at the Northern Ireland exposition in the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, a living model for learning the difficult but enduring character of mutually respectful dialogue.

It is fashionable these days in some quarters to be skeptical or even cynical about the global future of democracy. But as we commemorate this 4th of July, let me offer a more hopeful view.

For almost two decades, as head of the Center for Democracy, I had the privilege of not only studying the past but of observing the present, up close and personal, watching a range of societies undergo the difficult transition from controlled political structures to more open, freer ones in central Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and—wondrously—in Northern Ireland. Despite setbacks, which can be heartbreaking, an



overwhelming majority of people on this planet appear committed to economic modernization, to basic freedoms (even when not yet achieved), to the rule of law, to tolerance, to

peaceful solutions and an end to violent confrontation.

A word on 9/11 before concluding these remarks. In the space of a few hours, on September 11, 2001, the United States became a changed country. We entered a new and lengthy period of heightened security and greater national vigilance—which will, in turn, pose a challenge to civil liberties, as wartime situations always do.

Nor can we safely predict a future devoid of anguish and tragedy, whether due to fresh terrorist onslaughts or to our own shortcomings.

"History," the late Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote, "is not a redeemer promising to solve all problems in time." Today, Americans have entered this new testing time. How the present generation rises to the current challenge remains to be seen, but unlike most other people, Americans have traditionally welcomed the unexpected and new challenges.

"America was discovered accidentally," historian Samuel Eliot Morison reminds us, "by a great seaman who was looking for something else. When discovered, it was not wanted; and most of the exploration for the next 50 years was done in the hope of either getting through or around it. In fact, [America] was named after a man who discovered no part of the new world. History is like that, very chancy."

Let me close by mentioning another upcoming anniversary, this one in 2009: the 75th anniversary of the National Archives and Records Administration itself. It was founded by President Roosevelt, who also created the first modern Presidential library (which he deeded to the country). Our total holdings now exceed 10 billion documents, each and every one held in trust for the American people. Our mission statement makes this clear:

"The National Archives and Records Administration serves American democracy by safeguarding and preserving the records of our government, ensuring that the people can discover, use, and learn from this documentary heritage. We ensure continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government. We support democracy, promote civic education, and facilitate historical understanding of our national experience."

The National Archives will continue to safeguard these records every moment of every day, and we will honor our sacred obligation to make them maximally accessible without exception, evasion, or excision. On this Fourth of July, as Americans confront the dimensions of today's challenges, I and my colleagues at the National Archives send a plain message across time to those who have fought to preserve our liberties from the Revolution to the present:

We will honor America's legacy and work fiercely to fulfill our commitment to this agency's mission without exception, evasion, or excision. Now and into the future, with your support, the work continues. . . .

Thank you. And happy Independence Day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein". The signature is fluid and cursive.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States

*This column originally appeared in the July/August 2007 issue of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*