

Understanding July 4th

July 4, 2011

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Good Afternoon. Welcome. Welcome.

Excellencies, Ministers, Fellow Citizens, Dear Friends –

I am honored to be here in Belgium with all of you on this July 4th to celebrate together.

And I am always honored to share a stage with my dear friends Bill and Deborah Kennard. Ambassador Kennard represents the U.S. at the EU with wisdom and grace and I learn from him daily.

But the reason I am most thrilled to be here today, the reason that I am most honored to have the opportunity to share this day with each of you, is that I can say for the first time that I truly understand the meaning of July 4th.

You see, it has taken serving my country in Europe, as well as spending this remarkable year in front of the television and watching YouTube, for me truly to understand the meaning of Independence Day.

Indeed for 50 years, the Independence Day Celebration to me meant barbeques and beaches . . . fireworks and hot dogs.

Sure, the day stood for “Freedom” and “Liberty”.

“Freedom” and “liberty.” Marvelous words. But simply words nonetheless.

For how could I truly cherish such values as “freedom” and “liberty” when I had never tasted nor truly witnessed “oppression” or “occupation.”

Amidst the joy and laughter of a childhood spent on the streets of New York and of a legal career focused on the halls of Washington DC, July 4th’s words --- even sacred words like “liberty” – tended to blur into images of barbeques and beach fronts.

But “liberty” and “freedom” should never be confused with lemonade and sand castles.

Being here in Europe, in Belgium, spending time visiting with so many for whom the word “occupation” referred not to their job but to the invasion of their home.

Being here this year, when the television and computer screens kept us glued to the fate of people in North Africa who were willing to sacrifice their lives so that their children and grandchildren one day could laugh free at barbeques and on beaches celebrating their Independence Day ...

Here and now, I have come truly to understand the values at stake. It is the values that define July 4th – whether July 4th comes on November 11th in Ieper; or whether July 4th arose on December

17 in Tunisia with the actions of a single frustrated merchant; or on January 25th in Egypt from a single square. July 4th is never found on the beach or at a barbeque; it is always inside us all.

And so we understand that July 4th is not simply about celebration, but it is also about obligation. And so today, our Embassy and many of you our friends, engaged in a day of service before this evening of celebration. We joined together with Carlton Deal and his Serve the City project to give back – painting a refugee center and tending to refugee children who one day we hope can spend such days at the beach and hosting barbeques. We want to thank Carlton and Serve the City for today and for their service every day.

And the service project was a fitting reminder that this year as well is the 50th anniversary of the United States Peace Corps, founded by my recently-deceased friend Sargent Shriver, after President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to promote the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. In those 50 years, some 200,000 Americans have lived and served in 139 host countries. In our small diplomatic community today, 5 among our ranks have served in the Peace Corps: Jean Clark of USNATO, Craig Clark and Monica Isaza of USEU, and Jacqueline Deley and her husband Jeff of the bilateral mission. I suspect that they rarely confused July 4th with sunscreen and spare ribs and we thank them for their past and continuing service.

Focusing on those who serve, we are thrilled this evening to be joined by members of the world famous U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds team under the command of U.S. Major General James Hyatt. The Thunderbirds will be appearing at the Belgian Defense Ministry's Air Show in Koksijde this Wednesday and Thursday. Please stop by and meet them this evening.

A party of nearly 2000 of your closest friends is an amazing amount of work. We want to thank the Children's Choir of Sussex County New Jersey and the U.S. Army Europe Brass Quintet for performing here today. We want to thank our sponsors and supporters. Their names are listed prominently on the large banner at the entrance to the tent and their logos are scrolling on the 5 screens throughout the party. Take the time to read them, and thank them personally for their assistance. Each such U.S.-Belgian company is a true Ambassador fueling the engine of employment for both of our countries and building bridges between us as they supply products or services to us both.

A heartfelt thanks to the many volunteers from our Embassy with a special shout-out to some who have focused particularly hard on this event: my deputy Rob Faucher; the world's greatest assistants Ellen Hamblett and Paige Williams; the best household managers ever Inge Smets and Maarten Bogaerts; our Protocol head Florence Vanholsbeeck; and the head of our management team Tom Favret. And a special thanks from us all to Tania Chomiak-Salvi. Already holding down two full-time jobs, Tania volunteered to lead this year's planning and she brought her well-known and well-respected energy, judgment and wisdom to the task.

And last, but Americans always save the best for last, I want to thank each and every one of you, not simply for being here today, but for your friendship each and every day. When it comes to reflecting on the value of freedom and liberty, there is no where I would rather be and no one I'd rather be with than right here, with each of you.

So enjoy the evening, thanks so much and all the best.