



PRESS RELEASE

U.S. EMBASSY RANGOON

110 University Avenue, Kamayut Township, Rangoon, Burma

U.S. Embassy Celebrates U.S. Independence Day

Yangon, Myanmar – On July 2, the United States Embassy hosted a U.S. Independence Day celebration at the residence of U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell. The celebration was attended by presidential ministers, former political prisoners, civil society representatives, members of the business community, and others.

The full text of Ambassador Mitchell’s remarks, as prepared for delivery, is below:

“Thank you all so much for joining me and my colleagues from the U.S. Embassy this evening.

This year’s is a special Independence Day celebration. Not only because it’s being held on July 2, not July 4 (I’ll get to that in a second). But it is of course my first as ambassador, and the first hosted by a U.S. ambassador here in 23 years.

Next week, July 11 in fact, will mark the first year of my tenure here. I remember an event held that day last year that launched my tenure, a reception on behalf of the US-ASEAN Business Council. It included a range of people like we have here tonight -- including presidential ministers, former political prisoners, civil society representatives, businessmen and others.

Our relationship over the past year of course has entered an entirely new phase. But this should not mislead us from the fact that our relationship is in fact rooted deeply in history. For that, I hope you were able to spend a little time looking at the photos we enlarged and put up around the grounds. I think we probably lost many photos over the years that conveyed the depth and breadth of our relationship in the past. You’ll see American Jazz legends Count Basie and Duke Ellington in performances in Yangon in decades past, as well as many American political figures. There’s one of then-Vice President Richard Nixon’s 1953 visit, where he’s actually wearing a longyi. You haven’t lived until you’ve seen Richard Nixon in a longyi.

Now we’re creating new milestones in the relationship, and hopefully in the country itself. Over the past year, much has been achieved and yet many challenges remain. But I think what we commemorate tonight from my country’s history may help put some of those achievements and challenges into context.

On July 4, the United States celebrates the day our founders convened under some stress in Philadelphia to declare the nation’s independence and establish a new nation.



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The Declaration of Independence established the new nation on the principle of equality -- “all men are created equal,” it said; of course, then we had to fix that “all men” part later -- and that each of us is endowed with certain natural rights that no king or sovereign of any kind had any right to take away. Those rights, the Declaration said, included life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

On Independence Day, therefore, we celebrate the foundation of what it means to be American. But of course we also celebrate something much broader: the belief that those principles, those natural rights, as enshrined in the Declaration, are not reserved for Americans alone -- it doesn't say “all Americans are created equal” -- but reserved for all human beings everywhere.

Generation after generation in the United States, however, struggled with the Declaration's words, as people applied the ideas and ideals to reinterpret what it meant to have a truly just society of equality and liberty. And our Constitution -- and the way we interpreted it -- changed along with it.

From the abolition of slavery, to the establishment of voting rights for women, to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and most recently the granting to gay and lesbian Americans marital rights equal to that of any other man and woman.

But if you know American history you know it took some time and didn't come easy. Which is why holding this commemoration on this particular day, July 2 rather than July 4, actually has special importance this particular year, 2013. A significance I believe that connects to what is happening here in this country.

For it was exactly 150 years ago today that Americans were in the midst of fighting one of the bloodiest and most consequential battles in our nation's history, the Battle of Gettysburg, in which Americans were fighting other Americans, in some measure to ensure the meaning of the Declaration's words was fully realized indeed for everyone, even for African-American slaves.

The Battle of Gettysburg 150 years ago today is often viewed as the turning point of our civil war, which itself was a turning point in our country. From that battle came some of the most important words in American history, when several months later Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address gave new meaning to our country's founding and to what was at stake in our civil war.

In that address, Lincoln reached back, not to the Constitution, which allowed slavery, but to the Declaration of Independence as the most important foundational document of the United States. In that address, Lincoln talked about the United States as a nation “conceived in liberty” and “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (still men).



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He urged his countrymen to ensure those lives lost brutally on the civil war battlefield did not give their lives in vain, but sacrificed themselves so the country could enjoy what he called a “new birth of freedom.”

Lincoln concluded by ennobling their sacrifice with even bigger meaning: as one that will ensure that democracy, “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

As the civil war came to a close, about a month before he himself was killed, President Lincoln spoke again about the tragedy of civil war. In his second Inaugural address, he quoted the Bible and foreshadowed the challenges of reconciliation.

He called on the American people to rise to that challenge: “With malice toward none, with charity for all,” he said, “let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Our civil war was over in four years; here it’s been going on for 60. The devastation and mistrust engendered during our four lasted a long time after, some say it has not fully healed yet. We understand the profound challenges here. But we pray that soon the healing and reconciliation will truly begin.

At the same time, there have been and will always be those who insist on a narrower vision, a vision that excludes, marginalizes, and divides. Even as we all see the potential for the end of a 60-year civil war in this country, we yet see the shadow of fear and intolerance emerging among communities here. This is deeply sad to see.

Nonetheless, there is reason to hope for the future. It is inspiring that far from the battlefields of Gettysburg, far from the streets of Philadelphia, seeming a world removed from the United States – we see here people hopefully, if carefully, embracing the very concept Jefferson wrote about and Lincoln spoke of.

People – many here with us today -- dedicating themselves to fight voices of division, to honoring the proposition that all are created equal – whatever ethnicity, whatever religion – and to that eternal experiment of democracy, to ensure that all the people of this country enjoy the same rights, respect, dignity, and justice that the majority or the privileged or the elite do.

This is what we celebrate tonight. Not just the birth of the United States but the eternal commitment to those principles of human dignity and justice.



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Here the path will be difficult, there will be many bumps, as there have been for the United States. But I am confident the people of this country will ultimately rise to the occasion. And we look forward to joining you on that journey – all of us here tonight together.

And in so doing, to re-dedicate ourselves to helping achieve a “new birth of freedom” for this generation and those who come after, so that indeed government of the people, by the people, for the people will take root here, and never perish from the earth.

Thank you all for coming.”

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