

Independence Day Remarks (as prepared)
U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell
Yangon, July 3, 2014

Distinguished guests, ministers, fellow ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen. AloMingalabakh'mya! Welcome to you all.

Thank you so much for joining my wife Min and me, and my colleagues from the U.S. Embassy, to celebrate the 238th birthday of the United States.

A year ago we held this July 4 party on July 2. This year, July 3. So we're getting there.

I want to thank the corporate sponsors who are listed on the banner there – all of whom, by the way, are doing outstanding work in demonstrating corporate social responsibility and investing in this country's future.

I want to thank Minister U Soe Thane and Deputy Foreign Minister Thant Kyaw for joining us tonight, and our very special guest of honor tonight, Minister of Immigration and Population U Khin Yi and his wife Daw Khin May Soe. Your Excellency, madame, I'm pleased you both can honor us with your presence here tonight.

Early last week, I was in Mon and Kayin States to inaugurate our first English Access microscholarship program in Mawlamyine. I met with about 50 students taking part in the program there. During a question and answer session, when it was my turn to ask a question, I asked what was the first thing that came to the students' minds when they think of the United States. A student's hand immediately shot up. He said: "multicultural."

I gave him an A.

The idea of multiculturalism in the U.S. actually came late – we were basically European, mostly British, to start. But of course today it is quite accurate.

And it is the theme of this evening. *E pluribus unum* on the national seal of the United States, and was formerly our national motto. It's a phrase in Latin that means, "Out of many, one." Put another way: Unity in diversity.

We're celebrating that American cultural diversity tonight in the best way I know how: through food. If you haven't already, I hope you will visit one or all of our six stalls to celebrate through food what the diversity of the United States means. Perhaps many of

you have already sampled a crab cake from the Northeast or fried bread from the Great Plains or my favorite Mac-n-cheese from the South – all courtesy of Kevin, of course.

So as you eat your way through the United States tonight, you will see that like this country, the United States is a country of many sights, sounds, smells, and unique traditions. Our citizens speak over 300 languages, and we are home to people who can trace their ancestry to hundreds of different ethnicities.

E Pluribus Unum: Out of many, one.

And the way we have kept our unity amidst our great diversity has been a common commitment to the principles represented in the Declaration of Independence whose anniversary we mark today. Principles of equality, natural rights, and democracy.

Equality is embodied in the immortal phrase “all Men are created equal” – and by “men,” of course we really meant men *and* women, even if we didn’t know it at the time;

Natural rights included “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”

And Democracy: that to secure these natural rights, governments must be instituted by the “consent of the governed”

These were powerful revolutionary ideas at the time that have stood the test of time.

I like to think today is also a day to honor the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson happened to found the University I attended, the University of Virginia.

When I was a UVA student, we were told to refer to him as “Mr. Jefferson,” as a mark of tradition and respect. Of course, we all called him “TJ.”

TJ wrote the Declaration when he was 33 years old. He went on to have a remarkable public career, as governor of Virginia, our first secretary of state, and our third president.

So it was notable that at the end of his long life, he instructed that the following three items from his career be put on his tombstone:

Father of the University of Virginia

Author of the Declaration of American Independence

And author of Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom

In the end, Jefferson chose as his legacy actions associated with education, equality, democracy, individual rights, and religious diversity. Not his service as president. And by most accounts he was one of our best presidents.

He decided the revolutionary idea that everyone should have freedom to worship as they like and have equal rights regardless of their religion was a more important legacy, as a founding principle of a new democratic country. He saw it as a source of our country's future stability and strength. And he was right. He had remarkable vision.

He knew that allowing religious intolerance to fester in the new Republic would undermine its stability, security, growth and development.

It may also be instructive that throughout his distinguished career Jefferson was hounded by the media, media notorious during the early days of our republic for their irresponsibility and unprofessionalism. All of our founders were targets of constant attacks on their character and competence: not only Jefferson, but John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, even George Washington.

They all hated these libelous attacks, and some tried to restrict the media. But in the end they recognized the importance of a free media in a democracy, even those media with questionable agendas, and the extremely tough skin required unfortunately to be a public servant in a free society.

Working to build a strong and just democratic society indeed is a struggle. It is fought over by every generation; the job is never quite done.

But I'm reminded of President Obama's favorite quote along these lines, which also happens to be a favorite of mine, something stitched into the rug in the Oval Office, a quote popularized but not originated by Martin Luther King.

It reads: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." In other words, to promote justice is to be on the right side of history.

It's admittedly an optimistic view of human nature and human society. Some say Americans are innately optimistic, perhaps naively so.

Well, maybe. But I don't think Reverend King meant the work of justice was easy or would come automatically. As his own life suggested, such work takes enormous

effort, courage, and sacrifice, requiring leaders and foot soldiers of high character and commitment. Leaders both in government and civil society.

I personally don't think it's naïve to believe we all can do better as countries and societies.

To believe that we can choose to build understanding rather than walls or fences to deal with those we have differences with.

To believe all are created equal in deserving dignity, rights and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

And that these are not just American principles but universal ones.

A great man once said: "Every nation in the world, being a conglomeration of races and religions, should develop such a nationalism as is compatible with the welfare of all, irrespective of race or religion or class or sex."

This quote wasn't from an American. The quote came from Bogyoke Aung San in 1946.

It is a founding vision of this country that seems appropriate for creating out of the many here, one.

At the same time, there will always be those trying to divide – due to political opportunism, fear, pride, whatever. It is one of the greatest dangers in a democracy -- or any society.

The United States is still working at this itself. After all, it has only been 50 years, virtually to the day, that the United States passed its Civil Rights Act of 1964 to safeguard certain rights and protections for all its people.

We have deep political divisions today. We are not perfect – not nearly so. We've learned many hard lessons. And we hope those lessons may be learned by others.

But we have succeeded as a nation as far as we have through a lingering belief in the founding words of our country even when the reality did not match those words. Those words were a vision to achieve, not a reality to celebrate. But that founding vision was important for successive generations to strive toward.

Which leads to where we are here today. The identity of the "new Myanmar" is now in play. What will be its founding principles? Upon what values and ideas will its

identity be defined? Who will define them? Will it be Bogyoke Aung San's vision of a unifying nationalism based on equality "irrespective of race or religion, or class, or sex," or something different? And how will that identity be socialized within this enormously diverse country?

Many of those here tonight have an opportunity to help define the identity of this new country. Many are committing tremendous time and energy to building the peace with justice that has eluded this country since independence. This includes our guest of honor U Khin Yi – and others here working on all sides. It is critical if difficult work. I know I speak for everyone here in wishing you all success in this task in the coming year from the bottoms of our hearts.

Americans never give up on their country, even as we struggle to fulfill our ideals 238 years after our founding. And we will never give up on this country either.

I think I again speak for everyone here that we all look forward to being your partners on your long and difficult journey ahead.

Thank you all again for coming tonight.