

Ambassador Olson's Remarks
U.S. National Day
Wednesday, February 20

As prepared for delivery

Assalamu Alaikum.

Welcome to this year's President's Day Celebration at the United States Embassy in Islamabad. It is my pleasure to be here with you today. As you may be aware, today's celebration is in lieu of an event on our Independence Day, July 4. We are choosing to celebrate the 237th year of the Independence of the United States on another holiday, President's Day, so that our guests can enjoy the more clement weather of February.

At the outset let me also acknowledge the many sponsors of this event. Citibank, LMK Resources, MTBC, Dell, GE, Coca-Cola, Pepsico, Dunkin Donuts, Weatherford, Shell, and Teradata provided generous support to help us mark this important day. These companies create lasting jobs in Pakistan, and in the United States, and they play a vital role in strengthening economic and commercial ties between our nations.

Before I go any further, I want to express my deepest and heartfelt condolences – on behalf of the United States Government and the American people – to the victims, families, and loved ones who suffered in the terrible sectarian attack in Quetta this past Saturday.

Officially, this holiday marks the birth of George Washington, our first President and the most revered of our founding fathers. In practice, however, we also use this occasion to pay tribute to numerous other great American presidents, including the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, who was also born in February.

But as we gather here today to honor the legacy of President Washington – America's consummate statesman, soldier, and citizen – it is only appropriate that we reflect on his leadership in shaping U.S. foreign policy during its most formative years.

In fact, it was Washington who, on July 21, 1789, signed into law the creation of the United States Department of State (what we call our Foreign Ministry)– and two months later appointed Thomas Jefferson as the first Secretary of State. Washington took these steps because he was aware that we would face challenges that could not be met by our nation alone. He understood that overcoming these challenges would require the United States to forge pragmatic partnerships with other nations to work together on mutual challenges and opportunities.

In Washington's farewell address he counseled his fellow citizens to "cultivate peace and harmony with all nations," but to ensure that America's foreign relations be grounded in "the best calculations of policy." He cautioned his successors of becoming hostage to emotion, and urged them to enter partnerships based on the merits of results achieved for both nations.

President Washington's words are all the more relevant today as the United States and Pakistan work together to address common challenges and further our shared interests. As I have said previously, I am fortunate to have begun my tenure in Pakistan at a time of renewal and refocus in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Over the past several months, our governments have made progress, measured through actions and not words, on a variety of important issues.

Moving forward, I am convinced that sustained cooperation between our nations will become even more critical. I am also confident that if we continue to pursue a principled relationship based on mutual interest and respect, our joint resolve has the potential to overcome huge challenges. We must work together to seize opportunities that further our shared goal of peace, stability, and prosperity in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and across the region.

Indeed, the future of Afghanistan is of the utmost importance to the United States and Pakistan. There is much that the United States and Pakistan can do together to facilitate a lasting and durable peace, in support of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process of reconciliation. To this end, we must work in concert and with purpose to help Afghanistan usher in a new era of peace, stability, and prosperity.

More broadly, the U.S. commitment to the region will remain steadfast beyond security transition in 2014. While the nature of our presence may change, the United States will not disengage from Afghanistan or Pakistan. The object lessons of history are there for all to observe – disengagement from this region has proved disastrous for US and global interests.

It is no secret that the United States and Pakistan have been through some difficult times. As is often the case among even close countries, we do not always see eye-to-eye and have had our share of disagreements. But our relationship has endured for six decades because it is based on principles that are fundamental to the peaceful, prosperous, and stable democratic future we want for American and Pakistani citizens alike.

The United States is committed to a long-term partnership with Pakistan, based on mutual interest and grounded in the joint realization that the needs of both our peoples are better served when we remain engaged. Our commitment is evident in the robust cooperation between our governments – in sectors ranging from infrastructure, education, and health to support for economic development and the protection of human rights.

George Washington understood that sustaining a worthwhile partnership is never an easy endeavor, and that (in his words) it “must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.” This is true for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. There is, however, a clear realization on both sides that much remains to be done.

I am confident we can continue to move forward together, one step at a time, to deliver on our shared responsibilities and promises to the people of the United States and Pakistan.

Thank you.