

The Meaning of America

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Excerpt

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In this bicentennial year we must really seek to understand what a tragedy it would be if, at this crucial moment in our nation's history, we couldn't find a way to understand what it is that we should be celebrating after 200 years and as we begin our third century.

America is a nation made up of people from many different lands. Unlike any other nation in the world, America is a nation of immigrants. Americans are a people created out of all the peoples of the world. This union was meant to represent the unity that, once established in one nation, like a microcosm, could be projected throughout the entire world. If people from all over the world could come here and create one nation under God, then surely it's possible that those same peoples in their native lands could join together to create one world under God.

During the past 200 years there is no question but that America has become a great nation -- perhaps the greatest nation on earth, and perhaps the greatest nation in history -- so I'd like to examine what we mean when we talk about greatness.

Several thousand years ago Rome was still a republic and was considered a great power. But as the empire's power grew and its reach extended to all parts of the known world, many of those original principles were corrupted and there was widespread hypocrisy, corruption and scandal. Suddenly one day there opened in the middle of the city a huge fissure, and all of the citizens of Rome were frightened. They consulted the Oracle and the Oracle said, "This is a symbol, a threat of the doom to come; the only way it can be averted is if the citizens of Rome will take their most valuable possessions and throw them into the fissure, whereupon it will close up and the city will be saved and the empire will resume its greatness."

The citizens of Rome ran back to their homes to gather up their most valuable possessions -- diamonds, gold, silver and jewels -- and then ran with them to the edge of the cliff and cast them into the crevasse, but nothing happened. They threw down their household goods, and even their livestock, but still nothing happened. Then one brave Roman soldier began to understand the question that they were facing; he suited up in his battle array, mounted his horse and rode to the edge of the crevasse, where he pledged his loyalty to Rome and leaped into the pit.

At that moment the fissure closed, Rome was safeguarded, and they understood that the most valuable possession in Rome was not the wealth that she had gained from her conquests all over the world. The wealth of Rome was in her people. The greatness of Rome rested on the greatness of her citizens, and the extent to which they were separated from that was the extent to which their empire became watered down, diluted, and its power faded.

In our own American Society -- such a great experiment! -- 40 years after the Revolution it was still a

source of amazement to the leaders in Europe that this country was continuing to function. It was considered totally unworkable, a ridiculous fad, something that would fade away and collapse from its own lack of internal strength. When that didn't happen, but instead the country began to grow, the great French historian Alexis de Tocqueville came here to study the phenomenon. He wrote, "I sought the greatness of America in her harbors and commerce and mines and fertile fields, but it wasn't there. It was not until I entered her churches and found her pulpits aflame with righteousness that I understood the greatness of her power. America is great because America is good, and if she ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." He understood in that moment, speaking as a foreigner 'with no special cause to uphold, that America's greatness was rooted in her righteousness.

America is a unique nation. If we examine the history of this nation, what do we find here that is so unprecedented, that drew people from all over the world to seek, to find and to share? As I thought about America, I realized that the meaning of this nation can be found in the word "faith." The people who came to America and built this nation had faith -- faith in themselves, faith in their new country and faith in God. It took a great deal of faith to leave their homes and to make the perilous journey to America. More than 15 percent of the people making the voyage across the Atlantic died en route. It was a difficult journey, one to be seriously pondered before being undertaken; once here, it was unlikely that you would ever see your homeland again.

Yet many families came. Their situation had been difficult in Europe, but their ancestors had survived and they, too, could survive there. It took a great deal of faith that what they were going to would give them a greater opportunity than what they left behind. They had faith in themselves, faith in their own ability to take advantage of that opportunity. That faith was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the people that came to pioneer America. Those men and women who populated these colonies 200 years ago were people with a tradition of faith in themselves. They were willing to accept responsibility for themselves and for the life they could create.

After this nation was established and the pioneer families began to push westward, that same tradition of faith in themselves was maintained. How else could it be that people would pack up the few things they owned in a small wagon, cross uncharted territory for a dream that wasn't even clear in their own minds, settle down in a place that was completely barbarian, where their lives were in danger from the native Indians, and yet give thanks that this would now be their home? Those people had faith, faith in themselves, and that was the first building block of this nation.

But it takes more than that to build a nation. All nations have many people with faith in themselves. The next building block of America was faith in this country. Certainly it was an act of great faith when men from the weak and diverse colonies came together in Philadelphia and dared to challenge the greatest military power on earth. They wrote a document which was treasonous by the standards of the time, saying that these 13 colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states. Benjamin Franklin commented when they signed that they had better all hang together, or surely they would hang separately. It took a great act of faith, even at the beginning of this nation, to dare to believe that such a nation could be born -- a nation founded on belief in the freedom of the individual, a belief that his rights came not from the king, not from the state, not even from the society, but his unalienable rights came from his Creator. This was the first nation on earth to be dedicated to that proposition, and it took incredible faith.

Faith is easy to have when everyone around you shares it, but real faith is tested when it's unpopular and no one around you can accept or understand it. More than one-third of the colonists in America didn't share that faith, and many fled to Nova Scotia or returned to the home country. There was great division within families, within communities, even before the British soldiers came. It took an act of great faith even to begin the building of this nation.

That faith had to be tested again and again. After 100 years we went through a very great test at the time of the Civil War. But even before that, the faith that was put into this nation at the time of the Revolution created something that had never been seen before on the face of the earth: a nation with the ability to extend itself and multiply itself, and yet to grant to others the same rights and privileges that it wanted for itself. This had been the problem of the European powers when they went into new territories and established colonies. But with the passing of the Northwest Territories Act in America the Congress of the United States made it possible for other colonies, other territories, to organize themselves as states and assume full and equal status with the original 13 states that had begun the nation.

The great challenge to avoid the dangers of imperialism was passed at that moment. This concept of federalism was a reaffirmation of faith in this unique nation and a desire to share its blessings with many people. It's amazing that these United States could be built out of 37 states slowly added to the original 13, one by one, over a period of time. It's unprecedented in the history of man. It began with an act of great faith, that we could admit others into the union with full and equal rights, full and equal voting privileges, to determine the destiny of our country. It required great faith in democracy and great faith in this country.

Faith in this nation was tested most severely at the beginning of its second century when the country was divided against itself in the Civil War. The value of the nation was examined, tested and reaffirmed by the people. It would have been a good time for a vindictive people to take control and to exploit all the territories in the South -- and to some degree we must admit that happened. But it's amazing that the period of reconstruction was marked by principles, that those states could be rehabilitated so quickly and

reunited into one federal union dedicated to the same principles, with animosity toward none. It was another reaffirmation of faith in the meaning of this nation, that all people could find justice, freedom and value in this land.

Most importantly, this nation was built on faith in God. The third and most important building block of our nation was that deep faith in God. When the first settlers came here on the Mayflower, before they even landed, before their ship put in, they wrote the Mayflower Compact which began, "In the name of God, Amen." When the Continental Congress deliberated in Philadelphia, before they opened their sessions the representatives buried their heads in their hands and prayed for God to guide them. They were men strong in their own opinions, yet so humble before God that they could dare to hope, dare to believe that He would come and work through them to give birth to this great idea. That faith in God persisted and was reaffirmed many times.

In present-day America, which is so far removed from many of those original precepts, it's hard to remember or even imagine what those times were like. I read recently the very moving story of the linking of this nation by railroad from the east to the west coast. This transcontinental railroad was to be the force that would unite the nation, cut down transportation time and open up possibilities for shipping and commerce. It was an important act in the building of the nation, and all of America waited with great anticipation as the day drew near in Utah when the final spike was to be driven.

Western Union telegraph operators had the lines open. They sent many warning messages: "We're drawing close. We're almost there. When the final spike is driven we'll telegraph 'done.'" At that time church bells nationwide would peal and everyone would know that America was connected from Atlantic to Pacific.

Finally when they drew very close they telegraphed, "We're getting very close. The prayer is now being offered." They sent one more message: "We have done praying now. The final spike is about to be driven." Even that act of uniting the nation east and west was sealed in prayer -- not just a superficial prayer which would escape the notice of even those present at the ceremony, but one that was telegraphed throughout the nation, both when it began and when it ended, because they were so grateful to God for the blessings of this nation, and so aware of their continued need for God's presence to guide them in building our future.

People came from all over the world to build America, and their contributions were invaluable. Sometimes we think that we have great difficulty in America now because of divisions between cultural or racial groups, and yet how much more pronounced those differences were 100 years ago or 200 years ago. How much more difficult it must have been to conceive of yourself as an American, and yet how great the dedication, the sacrifices and the inspiration that came from those who did so! At the time of the Revolutionary War, for example, there was a Dutch widow by the name of Clara Louise Maas. She had lived in a small house all her life, but after her husband died she inherited some money and she bought a big, beautiful house that she had wanted for a long time. She loved that house, but the British threw her out and took it over as their headquarters. When the American colonial soldiers arrived, one general had to bring her the sad news that the only way they could defeat the British in that area was to destroy her house. They had refused to surrender even though they were surrounded, completely overwhelmed and outnumbered. Her heart was broken, and yet just a few moments later she went back to the general's tent carrying a bow and arrow to be used to set fire to her house, saying, "I'm proud that I could serve my country in this way." She sacrificed everything she had left, the things that meant the most to her, because of her faith in this nation.

There was a Scottish gentleman, John Burns, who was 70 years old at the time of the Civil War. He loved this country, and he wasn't going to let it be torn apart. They laughed at him as he marched up to the front at the Battle of Gettysburg. They thought he was too old to fight, but he went right up to the front line and he fired away with all the rest until he was hit and they dragged him back. When they looked for him they found he had gone back to the front line -- 70 years old and wounded -- firing again and again, until he was wounded a second time and again they carried him back. And when they looked, he had returned to the front line and was again firing. His faith in this nation, his love for this land, was so great because of what it had meant to him and to the family that he had raised, that he was willing to put his life on the line to defend its unity.

What has happened? Why is America so different now? There are many explanations. My government professor in college said that the two World Wars in this century represented a crisis in faith, that man lost faith in his ability to solve his own problems. In desperation we began to seek compromising solutions and we lost our sense of righteousness, lost our sense of purpose, to the point where during the administration of President Eisenhower a committee was formed to determine the purpose of this nation. They consulted with the leading figures in this nation, but after six months they disbanded without a report because they couldn't decide the purpose or the meaning of this nation.

During the Kennedy years we had great hope for the future based on the work of the Peace Corps and the VISTA program, and the Johnson administration's War on Poverty gave us hope to construct the Great Society, but somehow we lost our faith when those hopes were not realized. Here we are at the end of 200 years of the greatest, most remarkable history on record, where so much has been accomplished, where people have come from all over the world to create an ideal which gave life and hope and inspiration-and still does -- in all the other continents of the world. The words of our founding documents are repeated

again and again in the constitutions of so many of the new nations in Africa and Asia and elsewhere. The historian Henry Steele Commager has said, "The power of those words to inspire others is still apparent. The question is whether those words still have the power to inspire us."

In this bicentennial year, as we look around in the America that has meant so much to so many people, we see that mental illness has increased twofold in the last 20 years. The suicide rate tripled in that same time period, and even more shocking, in the 20 to 24 age category which 20 years ago had the lowest suicide rate, the suicide rate is now the highest. Our young people just starting out in life have lost their hope and their direction. America is facing a crisis today just as great as the crisis of the Civil War that erupted as we began our second century, and our response must be just as great. If we reexamine the foundations of greatness in this country, we find that America was built on faith; and yet faith is what is lacking in America today.

The Bicentennial God Bless America Committee was founded by another immigrant, another man who came from a faraway place, a man who could recognize the greatness of America and who was deeply troubled by the crisis of the spirit that is all too apparent to those at home and abroad in these difficult days. Our founder, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, has been working in America for the past four years, and he will expand his work to the international level, but in this bicentennial year he has initiated a tremendous project which has nothing to do with the church that he represents, nothing to do with any single denomination or any nationality or group. He founded the Bicentennial God Bless America Committee to bring us together as Americans, to reexamine the foundations of our greatness, and to make a tremendous recommitment and experience a rebirth of our faith. The purpose of the Bicentennial Committee is to s, read the message of the greatness of America throughout the land, beginning with a tremendous rally in Yankee Stadium on June 1st, and culminating later this year with a great rally in Washington, D.C.

This is the year when we want to work side by side, immigrants from every nation and native-born Americans, members of every church and denomination and those without a church, because all of us have so much to celebrate that we are Americans and that God has blessed this land. Therefore, the first purpose of the Bicentennial God Bless America Committee is to give thanks to God for all the blessings He has bestowed upon this nation. Only in that spirit of thanksgiving can we even begin to contemplate our future and the years to come.

Secondly, we want to renew the American Revolution -- a revolution of the spirit, to go back and recommit ourselves to the same faith in ourselves, faith in our country, and above all, faith in God. That spiritual revolution will rekindle today the flame that had this land ablaze 200 years ago, and 100 years ago. Today that fire will clean e this land in spirit and make us a generation recommitted to the principles and the meaning of this American dream.

And finally, at a time when the technological advances of this world have brought us so many things, they've also brought us to an awareness that we can no longer live as isolated nations on one small planet earth. The same principles by which God led us to establish one nation we must use to establish one world. Therefore, we want to rededicate this country to the principle of establishing not just one nation under God, but one world under God. These are the three principles of the Bicentennial God Bless America Committee.

This was a land which was built on faith, and we wanted to share with you the faith that we have, that as America begins her third century it can go every bit as far -- and as much further -- in the next 100 years as it has in the past.

We invite all of you to join with us in the spirit of this festival and this crusade. I'd like to conclude by sharing with you the final paragraph from our statement of purpose:

"America's greatest strength has been her faith in God. This is still the key to goodness and the prosperity of our land. In our bicentennial year let us fully celebrate the greatness of our heritage, but let us also rededicate ourselves to fulfilling it. As a nation, let us give ourselves to God. In that act of giving lies blessing to our nation and the world for generations to come."

I invite all of you to join with us in celebrating the spirit of the bicentennial of America by recommitting our faith in ourselves, our faith in our nation, and our faith in God.