

INDEPENDENCE DAY ADDRESS
July 4, 2011

My Fellow Americans, Philadelphians, friends in the region and members of the military service here and abroad. Good morning. And Happy Independence Day!

Thank you City Representative Melanie Johnson for once again producing a terrific Wawa Welcome America.

And let me recognize:

Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park; And the Buddhist monks of the Buddhist Humanitarian Association of South Philadelphia for their invocation earlier.

Today, on our nation's 235th birthday, we gather in Philadelphia where American history began.

We come here to Independence Hall where our Founding Fathers asserted a radical idea of human freedom.

Each of us, they said, is endowed with certain unalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Government, they said, derives its just powers from the consent of the people, or as President Lincoln said almost a century later - our government is "of the people, by the people and for the people."

These ideas of personal freedom and democracy continue to echo around the globe. We watch with hope as brave souls in Libya and Syria confront tyranny in the name of freedom.

And as they willingly face the tyrant's gunmen, they dream of democracy, a system that protects a person's right to say, think, and believe what he or she wants. It is but the latest chapter in the never-ending march toward human freedom.

Here, in America we have achieved many of these freedoms and at substantial cost in human life.

We've seen the expansion of freedom, from a time when only white males of property were full citizens to a time when slaves of African descent and women gained their personal freedoms, their rights to equal employment, to vote and to hold public office ... and even to become President of the United States of America, as Barack Obama has done.

And, we need a national immigration policy, for a country that is made up of immigrants, so that those who are new to America who wish to lawfully enjoy all that America has to offer can live here in peace and without fear.

Today, in a world of astonishing technological change, yet where our natural environment faces new threats and where the divide between rich and poor

continues to widen, what does “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” really mean?

What does it mean to some of our young people, especially young black men, some without education or hope, shooting each other for no good reason, senseless violence born of ignorant behavior.

What does freedom mean:

In a city where at least a quarter of the population lives in poverty with few means to change their life circumstance?

In a nation that ranks 9th in college degree attainment compared to other nations and where high school students have fallen terribly behind on standardized math and science tests in international competition?

Well, to start, America is a nation based on the idea that we the people can be whatever our imagination and determination drive us to be.

Now, in the past, when the farm or the factory ruled our economy, the pursuit of happiness required a relatively clear set of skills.

But in the 20th Century, America became a global power thanks to a powerful Compact between taxpayers and their elected representatives at all levels of government. This consensus created a system of public education from kindergarten through college and graduate programs.

And this educational system produced a highly skilled workforce second to none. America became the preeminent economic power in the world.

Today, we are in the midst of a dynamic structural change in the national and global economies. It has caused pain and undermined our native sense of hope.

While the future is forever unknown, I am certain that no American can enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness without a good education that prepares him or her as a life-long learner, a person with an array of skills who can adapt to changing times and compete fully in the global economy.

As we watch the rise of competing economic powers, America faces powerful barriers that hamper our ability to compete. They are weapons of mass destruction, but they are not hidden somewhere half way around the world.

They're right here in America - ignorance, illiteracy and poverty - powerful forces that economically, morally and socially drag us down and prevent us from fielding the very best team we can in the new competition for economic might.

And yet, as the brutal impact of the Great Recession is ending, we're now seeing the start of the Great Retreat: by our Federal and state governments.

A Great Retreat from the Compact to provide a thorough education to ALL Americans. In the name of political fiscal conservatism, we're seeing public education spending for current students and the next generation of workers, entrepreneurs, researchers and innovators slashed.

It's penny wise, pound foolish.

These ideas and actions sideline on the bench potential star performers before they even have a chance to show what they can do. Our young people need real change, not chump change.

These short term actions enable some politicians to brag about balanced budgets as they knowingly unbalance our future and undermine our ability to "out educate, out innovate and out build" the world.

We all must join together as Americans and say "No" to such views. Education and investment in our nation's future workforce must be seen for what it is - a key strategy in the National Defense of America.

It is our only way to defuse the real weapons of mass destruction that are quietly ticking day after day.

Fifty years ago, President John F. Kennedy committed this nation to landing a person on the moon and returning him safely. It was a huge undertaking that involved investment in education, innovation and sophisticated infrastructure.

In those years, America met the Soviet challenge by supporting students in college with National Defense Education Act funds.

And later, noting that "education is the path to achievement and fulfillment for the nation," President Lyndon Johnson pushed through Congress landmark legislation supporting the funding of K through 12 public schools and higher education institutions.

My friends, if this country could put a man on the moon safely, then surely we can put a young person in College smartly.

We must invest in opportunity for everyone in a systematic way, starting with pre-school children and extending to graduate education. It must be seen for what it is - an investment to secure our national defense.

It will require more resources not less. And it will require a very determined recommitment as a Nation to a Compact on Educational Excellence unlike anything we've seen to date.

In the past, America has been warned or criticized for the development of a Military-Industrial Complex and more recently for a Prison-Industrial Complex. What both have in common is spending that does not create self-sustaining wealth and economic growth.

Instead, I urge a rededication to wealth producing investment, to the creation of an Education Innovation Complex that offers each American the opportunity to achieve what he or she can. We need to invest in our citizens, especially our young people, and the many institutions that prepare them for life.

And that's just what we've been doing here in Philadelphia by creating a Mayor's Office of Education and innovative programs like PhillyGoes2College, Graduation Coaches and Returning to Learning for public employees who want to upgrade their skills..

Today, I want to recognize a couple groups of young people with us. First, members of Youth United for Change who were outspoken and visibly expressed support for more school funding from the City and the State because they care about their education.

Second, you can see a group of young people in their graduation gowns in red, white and blue. In a few minutes, they will be marching with me in the Welcome America parade. Graduates, please stand.

These young men and women are a case study in the will to succeed. They have overcome all the barriers that an urban environment and life can throw at them.

They didn't make it in the traditional public school system, but like Great Philadelphians they came back, made a conscious decision to make something of themselves and are graduating from accelerated schools.

Let us congratulate them and urge them to take the next step in their education journey.

And paraphrasing Winston Churchill let me say this is not the end of your education or even the beginning of the end but rather just the end of the beginning.

We adults need to help you as you make your choices in the next few years. It's our job to offer you opportunities; it's your job to seize them and do everything you can to develop your futures.

Your opportunities for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have expanded thanks to your choices and Philadelphia's willingness to fund these innovative schools that are helping you prepare for full and productive lives.

As a nation we must commit anew to the thorough and efficient education of all of our children.

Because:

An educated America is a safe America at home and abroad.

An educated America is a smart America able to compete in the world economy.

An educated America is a sustainable America able to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

And when we invest in our cities and make them "education cities," then we will be The Education Nation, a powerful beacon of freedom and hope in the world .

And each well-educated young person will become a participating, free-thinking citizen ready to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as a proud American.

Ladies and Gentlemen, The American Revolution started here 235 years ago, with young people, armed with muskets and prepared to fight for our country's future. Let us start the American Education Revolution today with our young students, armed with knowledge and prepared to fight for our country's future, where else, but in Philadelphia.

Thank You. God bless you, God bless America and Happy 4th of July.