

Remarks at the Opening Ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty Centennial Celebration in New York, New York

given on July 3, 1986

Thank you. And Lee Iacocca, thank you on behalf of all of America. President and Madame Mitterrand, my fellow Americans: The iron workers from New York and New Jersey who came here to begin restoration work were at first puzzled and a bit put off to see foreign workers, craftsmen from France, arrive. Jean Wiart, the leader of the French workers, said his countrymen understood. After all, he asked, how would Frenchmen feel if Americans showed up to help restore the Eiffel Tower? But as they came to know each other—these Frenchmen and Americans—affections grew; and so, too, did perspectives.

The Americans were reminded that Miss Liberty, like the many millions she's welcomed to these shores, is of foreign birth, the gift of workers, farmers, and shopkeepers and children who donated hundreds of thousands of francs to send her here. They were the ordinary people of France. This statue came from their pockets and from their hearts. The French workers, too, made discoveries. Monsieur Wiart, for example, normally lives in a 150-year-old cottage in a small French town, but for the last year he's been riding the subway through Brooklyn. "A study in contrasts," he said—contrasts indeed. But he has also told the newspapers that he and his countrymen learned something else at Liberty Island. For the first time, they worked in proximity with Americans of Jewish, black, Italian, Irish, Russian, Polish, and Indian backgrounds. "Fascinating," he said, "to see different ethnic and national types work and live so well together." Well, it's how we like to think of America. And it's good to know that Miss Liberty is still giving life to the dream of a new world where old antagonisms could be east aside and people of every nation could live together as one.

It's especially fitting that this lesson should be relived and relearned here by Americans and Frenchmen. President Mitterrand, the French and American people have forged a special friendship over the course of two centuries. Yes, in the 1700's, France was the midwife of our liberty. In two World Wars, America stood with France as she fought for her life and for civilization. And today, Mr. President, with infinite gentleness, your countrymen tend the final resting places, marked now by rows of white crosses and stars, of more than 60,000 Americans who remain on French soil, a reminder since the days of Lafayette of our mutual struggles and sacrifices for freedom. So, tonight, as we celebrate the friendship of our two nations, we also pray: May it ever be so. God bless America, and vive la France!

And yet, my fellow Americans, it is not only the friendship of two peoples but the friendship of all peoples that brings us here tonight. We celebrate something more than the restoration of this statue's physical grandeur. Another worker here, Scott Aronsen, a marble restorer, has put it well: "I grew up in Brooklyn and never went to the Statue of Liberty. But when I first walked in there to work, I thought about my grandfathers coming through here." And which of us does not think of other grandfathers and grandmothers, from so many places around the globe, for whom this statue was the first glimpse of America?

"She was silhouetted very clear," one of them wrote about standing on deck as their ship entered New York Harbor. "We passed her very slowly. Of course we had to look up. She was beautiful." Another talked of how all the passengers rushed to one side of the boat for a fast look at their new home and at her. "Everybody was crying. The whole boat bent toward her. She was beautiful with the early morning light." To millions returning home, especially from foreign wars, she was also special. A young World War I captain of artillery described how, on a troopship returning from France, even the most hard-bitten veteran had trouble blinking back the tears. "I've never seen anything that looked so good," that doughboy, Harry Truman, wrote to his fianc, Bess, back in Independence, Missouri, "as the Liberty Lady in New York Harbor."

And that is why tonight we celebrate this mother of exiles who lifts her light beside the golden door. Many of us have seen the picture of another worker here, a tool belt around his waist, balanced on a narrow metal rod of scaffolding, leaning over to place a kiss on the forehead of Miss Liberty. Tony Soraci, the grandson of immigrant Italians, said it was something he was proud to do, "something to tell my grandchildren." Robert Kearney feels the same way. At work on the statue after a serious illness, he gave \$10,000 worth of commemorative pins to those who visited here. Part of the reason, he says, was an earlier construction job over in Hoboken and his friend named Blackie. They could see the harbor from the building they were working on, and every morning Blackie would look over the water, give a salute, and say, "That's my gal!"

Well, the truth is, she's everybody's gal. We sometimes forget that even those who came here first to settle the new

land were also strangers. I've spoken before of the tiny Arabella, a ship at anchor just off the Massachusetts coast. A little group of Puritans huddled on the deck. And then John Winthrop, who would later become the first Governor of
50 Massachusetts, reminded his fellow Puritans there on that tiny deck that they must keep faith with their God, that the eyes of all the world were upon them, and that they must not forsake the mission that God had sent them on, and they must be a light unto the nations of all the world—a shining city upon a hill.

Call it mysticism if you will, I have always believed there was some divine providence that placed this great land here between the two great oceans, to be found by a special kind of people from every corner of the world, who had a
55 special love for freedom and a special courage that enabled them to leave their own land, leave their friends and their countrymen, and come to this new and strange land to build a New World of peace and freedom and hope. Lincoln spoke about hope as he left the hometown he would never see again to take up the duties of the Presidency and bring America through a terrible Civil War. At each stop on his long train ride to Washington, the news grew worse: The Nation was dividing; his own life was in peril. On he pushed, undaunted. In Philadelphia he spoke in Independence
60 Hall, where 85 years earlier the Declaration of Independence had been signed. He noted that much more had been achieved there than just independence from Great Britain. It was, he said, "hope to the world, future for all time."

Well, that is the common thread that binds us to those Quakers [Puritans] on the tiny deck of the Arabella, to the beleaguered farmers and landowners signing the Declaration in Philadelphia in that hot Philadelphia hall, to Lincoln on a train ready to guide his people through the conflagration, to all the millions crowded in the steerage who passed
65 this lady and wept at the sight of her, and those who've worked here in the scaffolding with their hands and with their love—Jean Wiart, Scott Aronsen, Tony Soraci, Robert Kearney, and so many others.

We're bound together because, like them, we too dare to hope—hope that our children will always find here the land of liberty in a land that is free. We dare to hope too that we'll understand our work can never be truly done until every man, woman, and child shares in our gift, in our hope, and stands with us in the light of liberty—the light that, tonight,
70 will shortly cast its glow upon her, as it has upon us for two centuries, keeping faith with a dream of long ago and guiding millions still to a future of peace and freedom.

And now we will unveil that gallant lady. Thank you, and God bless you all.

(1363 words)

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