

Utah State University Commencement
Senator Robert F. Bennett
May 2, 2009

Thank you very much. It's a great honor for me to be here and to be with you. I'm going to tell you a story. It's a story with which you are familiar, but I hope as I tell it I might bring out a few things that you might not have thought of, and I hope I will leave you with some new appreciation of some truths you already know because I think these are truths you are going to need quite badly as you venture forth into the rather uncertain world you are facing. No, this is not an economics lecture about the challenges that are there. This is a history lesson. The most important and appreciated thing about it is that you need not take notes. There will be no quiz at the end of the hour.

When Christopher Columbus went back to Europe with the news that there was a magnificent new land to be reached by sailing west, the three primary seafaring nations of Europe were the ones that took the greatest advantage of that news. They were the English, the Spanish and the Portuguese. I think it's no accident that the three languages that are now spoken in the Western Hemisphere that Columbus discovered for the Europeans are English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Now at the time it was assumed that the people who got the best deal of following up on Columbus's discovery were the Spanish because the Spanish discovered gold. They discovered civilizations that were rich in gold. They discovered civilizations that had access to gold mines. The Spanish reveled in their new found wealth of gold. They loaded Spanish galleons with gold in the West and sailed them to the East so that they would become in their view, the richest country in Europe because of all the new world gold.

The English were not so fortunate. They landed in an area where there was no gold. They started their colonies in areas where the winters were harsh. The challenges were serious. Yes, there were rich natural resources but all they really got when they came to the Western Hemisphere was opportunity.

The Portuguese settled in what is now Brazil and they have their own history. I want to focus on the differences between the Spanish and their gold and the English and their opportunity.

Looking back on it through the lens of history we now realize that it was the English that got the better deal. The Spanish with all the gold they took back developed nothing of real lasting value for themselves and the colonies they founded. They destroyed their own economy with inflation with too much extra money in the money supply and without the appropriate growth in prosperity to have it make that much sense. Whereas, the English saw their colonies take advantage of the opportunity; build farms and manufacture, to use the term of the day, ships; create commerce; and become wealthy. Not wealthy in our terms. In our terms they all lived below the poverty level. But in their terms compared to where they had been, they were wealthy. They brought prosperity not only to the colonies but to the mother country as well. Opportunity it seems is a more valuable commodity than gold.

As those colonies began to sow their oats and decide they wanted to be independent, they revolted against their mother country that wasn't quite as robust and as vigorous as they were. Benjamin Franklin, whom the historian H.W. Brands has called the "first American," described Americans as a new race—a little rougher, a little less disciplined, but with a little more vision and a little more drive than the tired old races of Europe. The word "race," if we translate it into "tribe" or "ethnic group," remained the norm in Europe as the French and Germans for centuries went to war with each other for reasons no more applicable than the fact that they were French and German. And the Spanish, the English and the Dutch; the wars went on. War was a constant pattern in Europe between the various tribes. But in America, these different colonies decided that they would do better if they got together with each other. They

determined in the words of a resolution from Richard Henry Lee to the First Continental Congress that these colonies are, and by right ought to be, free and independent states. And after the war was won with the British they were very independent. They didn't get along with each other. They had their fights and their difficulties. Then they decided perhaps in the name of opportunity that they were going to get together. So they sat down and started drafting documents in the name of the United States. Because it probably was too much for a stenographer to say the United States of Delaware, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York; they just said let's call it the United States of America. Perhaps in an effort to avoid writer's cramp we got our nation's name.

The United States of America became the land of opportunity not just for the people who lived there but for the restless folk who, in Franklin's words were part of this new race wherever they lived, wanted to come and take advantage of the opportunity that was here. And come they did, from all different places, for all different reasons. The Irish came because the potato famine hit, and the Irish were going to starve if they stayed in their land. So we had the great Irish migration, and they settled primarily in Boston, Massachusetts. The politicians in Boston still all have Irish names. The Germans—you go to Pennsylvania and you find Germantown. You go to the Upper Midwest and find the Scandinavians. You go to San Francisco and find the Chinese. You go to Hawaii and find the Japanese.

It is a blot on American history that many of those who came, arrived in slave ships; not to find opportunity but because they were forced to come against their will. But their children have found opportunity. Their descendents have found opportunity and have become Secretaries of State, United States senators, governors, mayors, successful entrepreneurs even though their ancestors came here in that dreadful way.

In the process America fulfilled the words of Emma Lazarus's poem that are recorded at the Statue of Liberty. As the Statue of Liberty stands there in our biggest and most famous port and Emma Lazarus' poem says to Europe from which those first colonists came, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door." And so it was. The homeless, tempest-tost, the wretched came and became Americans, and in the process created a new nation different from every other nation in the world. Not for the reasons that I have been describing, but something happened as a byproduct of the circumstance I have been describing which is very important for you to remember. We became the first nation in the world that was not held together by tribal associations and tribal loyalties. We became a nation held together by an idea.

Look at us today. Who are the Americans? Tara Lipinski, Kristi Yamaguchi, Michelle Kwan, Sarah Hughes, Nancy Kerrigan; and these are only our lady figure skaters at the Olympics. Our presidents are named Roosevelt which is Dutch; Eisenhower which is German; Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton all of which are Irish. The Irish have had a pretty good run in American politics. And Obama which is Kenyan. Our senators are named Mikulski which is Polish, Domenici which is Italian, Voinovich which is Serbian, Inouye which is Japanese, Kohl which is German, Kennedy the Irish again, and McConnell and McCain who came from Scotland. Yes, there is a Smith and a Bennett there too so that the English are still represented. The Supreme Court—Rehnquist is Scandinavian, Scalia and Alito are Italian, Ginsburg is German. We don't pay any attention to that. We don't notice it because we are held together, not by our tribal identity or even our immigrant identity, but because we are Americans. It didn't happen overnight. It took time.

If you had asked Thomas Jefferson to name his native country, he would have said Virginia. And that held for a long time. It was the Civil War that ended that once and for all and loyalties became to union. There were those who did not have loyalty to the idea of union. And we fought a war over that issue along with the issue of slavery. But those who believed in

slavery and secession ultimately gave way as a result of that war to those who believed in union and freedom. And we went forward, wedded to that idea.

So where are we today in the world? We are the world's strongest military power. We are the world's strongest economic power. We are the world's dominant cultural power. There are some people who look at our Hollywood movies and don't particularly like that. But we are not the world's empire. We proved that in the Second World War. We conquered the Japanese who wanted to establish an empire and then taught them that all we really wanted to do was sell them things. We did not want to occupy Japan and dominate them. We liberated Europe from the yoke of Nazism and destroyed Adolf Hitler, and then under the Marshall Plan we financed the rebuilding of Europe including Germany. America did not, in the Second World War, just free the French and the Belgians and the Dutch, we freed the Germans. We helped lay the groundwork for a Europe today where instead of hating each other the Germans and the French joined together to plot against the Americans in the United Nations. The world enjoys free trade to a degree that it never has before because the U.S. Navy patrols the seas, not to establish American power in China or India, but to facilitate the transfer of goods between America and China and India and the rest of the world. You can be proud to be an American in spite of all of the terrible things that have happened here and there in America's history. The overall direction of America has been the right direction. We've had problems. We've had fits and starts, but ultimately we have moved in the right way. You can be proud to be of that new race of which Benjamin Franklin spoke.

But you must go forward from your formal educational experience dedicated to preserving the idea. So I will close by reciting it to you in language that should be so familiar that you could recite it with me. And if it isn't, memorize it. But if it is, teach it to your children. The American idea is contained in three documents that constitute the American testament.

The first one is, of course, the Declaration of Independence written by a young delegate to the Continental Congress named Thomas Jefferson. Because the man who was the driving force behind independence in the Continental Congress, John Adams, was too busy, he assigned it to Jefferson. There was a little bit of politics involved because Adams needed Virginia and Jefferson was a Virginian. And being the politician that he was, Jefferson realized in later years that it would help his political career if he became known as the father of the Declaration of Independence instead of allowing Adams to take any of the credit. There are some things in political activity that have not changed. But it was a superb choice because Jefferson was the best wordsmith of all the founding fathers and he did understand the concepts that went into it. So he was indeed the right one to have written down the idea as adopted by the Continental Congress. You know the words.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident [beyond debate], that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..." Rights come from God not from government. That's the American idea. "...that among these" rights and if Jefferson had gone to a modern law school he would have added "but not limited to"—"are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." That's the American idea. Everyone is equal, everyone has rights that are innate, they come from God not from government, and the purpose of government is to secure those rights, always in a way that depends on the consent of the governed.

The second document in the American testament is of course the Constitution. They gathered to outline how the government would be structured, but in the process of doing that, they further elucidated the American idea. In the Constitution and in its amendments we find that Congress shall make no law violating your individual right on conscience, religion, speech, press, the right to peaceably assemble, and, yes, lobby. Now they didn't call it that, they called it "petition the Government for a redress of grievances." But that's what Utah State University does when they come to see me. Today's people call it lobbying. I recognize that it is a

constitutional right however much it may have been abused, however much freedom of speech or freedom of religion or freedom of the press have been abused. In a free country we have the right to talk back to our government. Then the Constitution says, "No person shall be...deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law..." That's part of the American idea.

Then, as I say, the country finally faced the issue that the founding fathers were not able to resolve, the question of slavery. The debate over slavery and secession ended up finally in a war. The industrialized North prevailed over the agricultural South even though the South had better generals. The time came to talk about the survival of the American idea.

That's when Abraham Lincoln went to Gettysburg and delivered a very short speech that became the third document in the American testament, the Gettysburg Address. He starts off by asking the question of whether a nation founded on this idea can long survive. "Now we are engaged" he said, "in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." He went on to discuss it very briefly. Then at the end declared, in a prophesy that has come true, his optimism in the power of that idea as he said "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" as everybody in Europe was predicting that it would. If you go back and read the political commentary of the time, the Europeans were looking at this new race of which Benjamin Franklin spoke and smugly in the time of the Civil War saying this is what happens when you let somebody other than the highborn and the privileged and the aristocratic rule. Look at those poor Americans and what they are stuck with as a leader in this backwoods lawyer named Abraham Lincoln. Nobody remembers any of the European aristocracy in the 1860s. The whole world remembers Abraham Lincoln.

So, your assignment, and you must choose to accept it whether you want to or not, is to go forward from this place, commence your careers, earn your living, get married, raise your families, have your failures, experience your heartache, and live your triumphs but as the new generation of this new race of Americans. Make sure you perpetuate America's idea.

Thank you for the honor of addressing you.