

Head Over Heels in Love With America

Address to the SUMMER SENATE 2019 on July 12, 2019 at the Minnesota State Senate Office Building

By Tony Simonⁱ

Thank you, Governor Racer.ⁱⁱ

I should perhaps begin by apologizing as I am not a public speaker and am totally dependent on my notes. Needless to say, these are my words and meant totally sincerely and from my heart.

Therefore, I feel privileged to have been given this chance to speak a little about my passion for American history and indeed my love of the United States.

Let me introduce myself and tell you a little about my background and how I got hooked on this amazing country.

Until moving here two years ago, I lived my entire life in London (even though, I may be biased, London happens to be a great city). Anyway, I left school in my mid-teens which was not that unusual way back in the sixties to go into a family business. Then retiring after 49 years I decided to extend my reading (United States history especially) in an academic direction so I did a Bachelor's degree in history, which included many American modules. I went on to complete a Master's at UCL, one of London's well-known universities in U.S. history and politics. My dissertation made an argument that Abraham Lincoln was the heir to Alexander Hamilton.

I should inform you I moved here for family reasons. I have a daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters who are all American citizens now. My daughter was a little homesick when she first came here 15 years ago, but she is now a deep-rooted Minnesotan as well as a patriotic American. I always had a dream that one day I might live in what your sixteenth President described as the "last best hope on

earth." A view with which I agree over 150 years on.

Going back before Lincoln's time but still relatively recent by historical standards, 230 years ago to be precise, George Washington took office as America's first President trying to fuse a nation from 13 disparate States. This is like yesterday compared to, amongst others, Asian, African and European societies whose history had existed for an eternity in comparison. In spite of America's relatively short life, nothing has stalled its phenomenal ascent which has been nothing short of a miracle. America's exponential success has made a major impact on the world for high achievement and Western values. I read the other day what I considered almost amusing; When John Quincy Adams arrived at Berlin's gates in 1797 to take up the head diplomatic role while his dad was the second President, a dapper lieutenant guard asked "who the United States were?" This unawareness of America would be short lived!

By old world standards, William Faulkner was right to say about America that "the past is never dead, it is not even past." Maybe he meant, America is still a young transformative country where any past errors are always being revisited and revised-putting previous wrongs to right!! All countries have had chequered moments in their history coupled with original sin, but, few, if any, have conquered, reformed and overcome like America has.

I see America as a grand idea that has scaled insurmountable challenges with what was a litany of intractable and complex problems at its founding and thereafter. Nevertheless, the stoicism and pure tenacity of the American people emerges through the many trials and tribulations the country has faced in the differing and turbulent eras and periods. As undeniable as it is, there are still some who don't or won't acknowledge that America is a

power for good that has overtaken the rest of the world, it is not just any power, but, importantly, the world's only Superpower. Henry Luce, *Time Magazine* founder, was right to call the twentieth century, "The American Century." He could have also added it was the free world which was the real beneficiary of that American century, particularly, it resisted extermination and a level of evil on an unimaginable and biblical scale. It is beyond the human mind to conceive the kind of world, if any at all, would exist without the advent of America. (That is not an exaggeration!).

Governor Racer invited here today to speak a little about American history which is undeniably my favourite topic and my principal interest. America has a riveting history as well as a generally uplifting one. It is also the best source to see ahead. Let me quote Founding Father and firebrand Patrick Henry, who said, "I know of no way of judging the future but by the past." A point, I believe, worth making is that to truly enter into the spirit of the past is to come to terms with the nature of historical change. One should not be inclined to take as a given that history is a narrative or drama on an inevitable path. There are few, if any, certainties, and what we might call destiny today only became so by the endeavour and philosophy of a dynamic American populace. Despite this, there have been tumultuous times in America's past where things could have gone awry and, and maybe then, neither any of you would be sitting here today nor me standing here for that matter.

Seminal times found extraordinary people, people who should never be forgotten as they helped build this great nation. To name but a few might include, the colossus of a Chief Justice, John Marshall, who was a major factor in keeping the Union intact with sound jurisprudence and belief in the national project

and its Constitution. It was more than likely without the immense Kentuckian, Henry Clay, America could have fragmented before it really got started in earnest. His herculean Congressional struggles to reach pivotal compromises kept intact a shaky and vulnerable Union. It is undoubtedly true that Lincoln could easily have succumbed in the 1864 election without the military genius and prowess of Ulysses Grant. Grant's magnanimity and humility in victory merit lasting recognition. He is, in my opinion, as responsible as anyone for guaranteeing American perpetuity.

The list of iconic Americans is long and proud and nearly infinite. For instance, it would simply be too bleak to imagine an America without the lives of both Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt, not forgetting Eleanor Roosevelt too. Their priceless contribution for the American cause is beyond calculation. It is also hard to calculate the debt America and the wider world owes to Martin Luther King, Jack and Robert Kennedy. It would be impossible to overestimate how much more they could have accomplished, had they not been slain in the prime of their lives.

If we momentarily pretend an alternative world where the history we take for granted would have played out differently; we would find a horrendously dark world. A few examples of counter-factual history might be that the Union would not have been victorious in the Civil War and the Confederacy would have been reconciled and slavery accommodated. Another alternative could have been a grim nightmare if America had not ridden to the rescue in two world wars, vitally helping to defeat in the first the militaristic Central Powers and in the second, Nazism and fascism. How about if America would have failed to defeat totalitarianism and communism in the Cold War-what kind of world would we have? (Venezuela comes to

mind!) One should never forget (although it normally does) America salvaged a stricken Europe with the Marshall Plan and was the key to the formation of NATO. Finally think about Korea and Japan, suppose America had not rescued South Korea from an invasion from the North, a dystopian scenario on the Korean peninsula and beyond would have materialized. Post World War 2 America could quite understandably have turned Japan into a vassal state but facilitated its rebuilding into an industrial powerhouse instead. Some of the afore-mentioned alternative historical examples paint a lurid picture, yet, if America had pursued other policies, those possibilities would have been probabilities, or even sure-bets. It was American dynamism, foresight and largesse that saved the day-Uncle Sam literally saved the world!

I would be oblivious in my new surroundings if I had not noticed the sometimes-uncivil conservative-liberal discourse. I must admit to, at times, finding it dispiriting. I suppose many others likewise express some anxiety about the divisiveness and polarization amongst present generations. High spirited public debate can fuel gratuitous hatred. Therefore, maybe this is an opportune moment to recall Lincoln's emotional appeal to unity in his first inauguration when he asserted to the nation, that "we are not enemies, but friends" and emphasized that "we must not be enemies." Lincoln pleaded that the prevailing passions "must not break our bonds of affection." The lessons of history, that period in particular, and Lincoln's own great legacy would be better served to reconciliation and a robust dedication to the Constitution, which, incidentally, Lincoln had a spiritual veneration for. His unflagging devotion to that document redeemed the United States and in my humble opinion, that meant the free world too, as future events have underscored.

Notwithstanding America's leadership of the free world and ongoing global commitments, America also has had positive effects where freedom is often greatly compromised or non-existent. America's ideals and influence can often reign in the most ugly regimes where whatever depredations are endured by hapless citizens are often ameliorated by American measures, condemnation and disapproval. Yet the blessings of America are insufficient without the affection of its own younger generation. I feel all Americans, regardless of age and circumstances, ought to triumph the progress and immensity of what has been achieved, which, as I mentioned earlier, in historical terms, has been in an incredibly brief period. Worthy time spent immersed in American history will surely proffer much understanding and many answers. Young and old alike, would easily identify with Lincoln's foresight about being the "last best hope on earth," something as true then as it is now.

To conclude, please indulge me to share with you my own personal champion in the American story; he is Alexander Hamilton. My adulation has nothing to do with his British ancestry and was well before the eponymous hit musical. I'm smitten by him alongside your high-octane 26th and laconic 30th Presidents who both share my reverence for the first Treasury Secretary. Theodore Roosevelt worshipped Hamilton, describing him as "the most brilliant American statesman who ever lived, possessing the loftiest and keenest intellect of his time." Calvin Coolidge, before his ascendancy to become the 30th US President told a Chicago 1922 audience about Hamilton's greatness. I quote: "When America ceases to remember his greatness, America will be no longer great." I am confident this won't happen either with Hamilton or certainly not with America. Maybe, I can just add here, that not only was Hamilton like a surrogate son to George Washington, but he was the main force in having the Constitution

ratified. Even though it is constantly tested and tried, the Constitution has served this country and beyond exceptionally well.

I have really enjoyed this wonderful opportunity in relating to you a few of the reasons, though not all of them, why I confess to my perpetual, enduring bond to America and the gracious American people. If asked, I would delight in prescribing a dose of patriotism rather than the prevailing polarization. Whilst professing to the efficacy of protest, I would rather promote amity and empathy rather than apathy and antipathy. As only a few days has lapsed since the 243rd anniversary of the Declaration of

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Independence, what better time to inculcate the rising youth to that spirit and energy that led to the titanic struggles and sacrifices that the founding generation devoted themselves to, by keeping that famous American dream a continuing work in progress. It seems to me that the only real way for America to be hurt can be by hurting themselves and not fully appreciating where they have come from and where they have arrived at. I confess to being, perhaps too much, at least for an Englishman, head over heels in love with America, but there are way too many who appear, unjustifiably, out of love right now. It is a fitting time to reconnect.

people who formed the 2019 Summer Senate, a program offered and managed by Dave Racer, MLitt.

ⁱⁱ Student Senators, during their regular spring term, gave the title "Governor" to Dave Racer, their tutor.