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Natl. Treasures Tour

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT NATIONAL TREASURES TOUR KICK-OFF

National Museum for American History
Washington, D.C.

8:48 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Is this a great way to start the week, or what? (Laughter.) Thank you, Mr. Crew, Secretary Heyman, Ms. Rimel, Mr. Mayor and members of the City Council, Mr. Moe. Thank you, Denise, as always for being so wonderful. Thank you, Ralph Lauren, for this incredible act of generosity and, I think, foresight.

And I want to thank the First Lady for once again creating something of enduring value to our country in this Millennium Project.

You know, Hillary mentioned this, but 1814 was not a particularly good year for America. And the British did burn the White House and we've just finished a 15-year renovation of the White House and we left two of the great stones unpainted to remind people that it only became the White House after the British burned it, and when the burn marks couldn't be scrubbed off, the beautiful stone had to be painted white to cover the memory of what had happened. It's rather nice, actually, to have a couple of the stones unpainted so that we don't completely forget.

Not since that time has the United States been invaded. And so the confidence of all the people who were involved was well-founded. Francis Scott Key wrote The Star Spangled Banner in the midst of a very fierce battle. He was standing on the deck of a ship, behind enemy lines, looking into darkness, searching for the fate of the flag. The poem he wrote about it became our National Anthem.

If you remember the words and then you look at this massive flag, you can imagine what it must have been like in 1814, waving gallantly during the fight -- standing unconquered in the dawn's early light. Think how you would have felt if you would have seen it then.

This Star Spangled Banner and all its successors have come to embody our country, what we think of as America. It may not be quite the same for every one of us who looks at it, but in the end we all pretty much come out where the framers did. We know we have a country founded on the then revolutionary idea that all of us are created equal, and equally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that this whole country was put together out of an understanding that no individual can maximize the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness alone, and so we had to join together to reinforce each other's efforts.

And then there was another great insight, which is that in the joining we couldn't repeat the mistakes of the monarchies from which we fled, and give anyone absolute power over anyone else. And so we created this written Constitution to say that, okay, we've got to join together, and some people have to be our representatives and they should be given authority to make certain decisions, but never unlimited and never forever.

And I'd say that system has worked pretty well over the last 220-plus years. And that's what that that flag embodies -- at a moment when we could have lost it all, when the White House itself was burned, when a lot of people didn't think that we had such a good idea. And so, now it's standing there -- a little worse for the wear -- but quite ready to be restored. And in that sense, it is a metaphor for our country, which is always ready to be restored.

When Hillary and I were talking about what we should do to commemorate the millennium, and she came up with this phrase, "honoring the past and imagining the future," I loved it because it seems to me to be so much two sides of the same coin. You heard her only slightly making fun of me there about my obsession with the history of the United States and the White House and this great city. When I became President, I was often made fun of for my obsession about the future and trying to modernize the country, and to me, the two things are not inconsistent at all, because America is a country that has always been in the act of becoming.

You heard -- if you listened carefully to the remarkable statement by Secretary Heyman, he mentioned the phrase of the founders to "form a more perfect union." If you think about it, that's the enduring mission of America. They were very smart people, and they understood that any great nation is always a work in progress. They understood that they could never imagine the far reaches of America's future. They understood that these ideals they set up would never be perfectly realized.

And so they gave us a mission that will be just as good for our grandchildren as it is for us, just as good as it was for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, "to form a more perfect union," because there will always be something there to do better, always a new challenge. And I agree that if you look at where we are today, we have both the traditional responsibilities of every generation of Americans to deepen the meaning of our freedom and to widen the circle of opportunity, and all these new challenges. One of them is to deal with our phenomenally increasing diversity.

Didn't you get a kick out of seeing all those kids standing there doing the Pledge of Allegiance, all their backgrounds? Who were their grandparents, who were their great-great-grandparents? Where did they come from, what was their story? It doesn't matter, because they now have a chance to live the dream that was promised to all of us so long ago. That's what that flag embodies.

We have all kinds of responsibilities now to the rest of the world we didn't have before, because now the world is yearning for freedom and there is no Cold War, and we must summon ourselves to understand that in the 21st century, preserving everything good about America at home requires us to be more involved with our neighbors around the world than ever before.

We have new challenges when it comes to our natural environment, to prove that we can continue to enjoy the fruits of material prosperity while replenishing the Earth, not destroying it. There will be new and different challenges, but we can meet them best if we remember what got us here. That's why saving the Star Spangled Banner is important. That's why I asked the American people do it in the State of the Union. That's why I'm very grateful to Ralph Lauren today for stepping forward.

You know, most of us have -- well, maybe not most of us, but a lot of us, including Hillary and me -- have those great Polo sweaters with the American flag on it. I wish I had one with the Star Spangled Banner on it because that's the gift that he's given America today.

Now, I want to echo what Hillary said. There is more to do. President Lincoln and his family and many other Presidents' families used to stay in a little cabin up with the Old Soldiers Home here in Washington, D.C. in the summertime because the Potomac was so hot. That ought to be preserved for all time to come. And this committee has identified dozens of other sites.

But I also want to emphasize something else Hillary said, as she begins this tour over the next four days to identify nationally significant treasures. Every community in this country has got some piece of itself that needs to endure. And I hope that the public airing that this event receives today will make people in every community across our country once again say, what have we got here that we should preserve for our grandchildren and for all time to come. Americans need to know the stories of their country, their states, their communities, their families.

Let me especially thank the History Channel for doing its part to share the story of the Star Spangled Banner by producing its own TV documentary and providing teachers with educational packets about it.

Again let me say to all of you, too, we must continue to imagine the future. I asked the Congress to pass the Save America's Treasures program, as well as the biggest research program for the future in history, and to put them together so that our people could see that the story of America is a seamless one.

I hope all of you in this room and all of the people who are involved in this endeavor, every time you see the Star Spangled Banner for the rest of your life will think about preserving our past, honoring it; but also will think about imagining the future. What an imagination it took in 1814 to believe that America had a boundless future.

The Continental Congress said when it authorized the first flag of 13 stars that they were "a new constellation." They were right. When I looked at all those children today saying the Pledge of Allegiance, I thought, now we are a newer constellation --different than they could have imagined -- racially, religiously. We have no longer a small country on the Eastern seaboard, but a continental nation, with the greatest influence for good the world has ever seen, and an enormous responsibility for the future.

And that is the last point I would like to make today. You can neither honor the past, nor imagine the future, nor achieve it without the kind of citizenship embodied by all of our memories of the flag. So as you see this flag and leave this place, promise yourself that when your great-grandchildren are here, they'll not only be able to see the Star Spangled Banner, it will mean just as much to them then as it does to you today.

Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

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9:00 A.M. EDT