**15107, Kenneth Stroupe**

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and a privilege to address all of you, but especially our soon-to-be newest citizens. Any place is a good place to become an American, but no place is better than Monticello. For Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, the Big Bang that brought the nation into existence and the event that we celebrate today, broke ground here in 1768, first moved here in 1770, and lived here for most of his life until he died here July 4, 1826. Jefferson was an extraordinary, multitalented man. He independently studied politics, archaeology, linguistics, music, botany, bird watching and pasta making.

Jefferson's story is almost universally known, his brilliance and passion for liberty celebrated around the world. Yes, his vision of liberty was regrettably restricted to one race and gender. He was imperfect, as we all are, and a man limited by his times. Yet his life of extraordinary achievement and vision commands respect and gratitude. I'm especially appreciative that he founded the University of Virginia. I love my job and I wouldn't have it had Jefferson not persisted against great odds to create UVA! Wahoowa.

The extraordinary thing about America is that each citizen is given the tools and the opportunities to make a difference and to leave a legacy that will continue once our brief moment on earth has passed. Jefferson left an amazing legacy that was as multifaceted as his interests. The freedom to make your mark on society and leave a legacy is available to each and every American. You can choose one path or, like Jefferson, many paths. There are as many ways to produce a legacy as there are people on these grounds today. Since I'm the speaker, naturally I'm going to recommend my favorite: Politics. (You knew this was coming, surely.) I realize politics has a terrible reputation. Mention the word, and dark visions of corruption, bribery, and smoke-filled rooms are conjured up. The current presidential campaign certainly hasn't helped politics' reputation. How I would love to offer you some pointed commentary on that subject, but decorum on this day of unity prevents me.

In the spirit of the day, here's a revolutionary thought for your Fourth: Politics in America is a good and necessary thing. It's the oil that greases the creaky machinery of government. It's the glue that binds together a nation of continental expanse and stunning diversity. Unquestionably, the United States is the most diverse Republic on the face of the planet, as you here today prove, with concentrations on our shores of people from every other country around the globe. Without liberal application of politics, the centrifugal forces and discord generated by such diversity might rip apart the fabric of society. Without skillful application of the political arts, how could we hope to make our system work when power is divided in so many ways, vertically and horizontally? Just remember that politics will be as positive or negative as those involved with it. How you participate in it is up to you.

Politics is simply the means we use to make our nation, states, and communities better places to live. Your power as a citizen is awesome. You can shake things up by speaking up, starting a petition, organizing your neighbors, backing a candidate for office, or running yourself! And voting, of course--always, always voting. The choices may not be ideal from time to time, but there's usually a lesser of evils. The more active you become, the more influence you will have on those choices. Study what the political groups believe. Decide what you believe and write your own mission statement. Join a party or an organization that agrees with your beliefs, become a member and make a commitment.

Oh, and get ready to vote, a lot. Several times each and every year, in fact. Primaries and general elections and special elections galore. Just be glad you're in Virginia. We have a relatively short ballot. In California they elect so many offices and cast a ballot on so many issues that voting is a part-time job!

The truth is, citizenship is hard work. You have to do your homework because mistakes can prove costly. The web makes your task easier, though separating good from bad information can be difficult. Here's a tip. Ignore the shrill voices. You can safely delete any email or tweet that is written in ALL CAPS. Let me conclude where I began, when I cited Thomas Jefferson's amazing story. Despite his human shortcomings, he accomplished a great many things in his life.

Each of you has a remarkable story, too. Today you are beginning what we hope are the best chapters of all in your lives, the ones penned as American citizens. You came to America because of all the benefits of American citizenship. You came to America to experience a life free to choose the type of life you will live. You came to American to have your chance at having the American Dream. You came to America to escape some things in your country of origin. You came to American to make your mark and leave a legacy that will be remembered. And, finally, you came to America to give your children opportunities they wouldn’t have had in your birth country. Those opportunities do abound in America. In fact, there is no limit to what each of you can accomplish. And, when you have done all you can do, your children can begin where you left off and build an even greater legacy after you. Just look at immigrants who have come before you. Many began as manual laborers and now their great grandchildren own businesses and lead organizations. The only limits to what you can accomplish are the ones you allow. But, those opportunities won’t be handed to you.

The opportunities that come with your citizenship come with responsibilities. Determine in your minds and hearts today to give your entire heart to your new life here in America. Look for chances to make a difference. Help us to live up to our ideals. Make us better. Join us in civic enterprises that will benefit everyone. Remind us if we forget, that now that you are citizens our constitution includes you as well. But, as you begin to actively work in politics and business to make that better life, remember the negative examples you have seen, and determine not to fulfill those negative examples yourself. Decide that you will be the positive example in politics when you vote, when you volunteer in a political party and when you decide to become a politician yourself. Because the example you are setting is not just to remind us, it is to show your children how it should be done.

You cannot control the examples that those around you show to your children. But, you can show your children how to respond to the difficult days. You can show your children how to overcome the challenges of learning how to live in a new country, learning how to speak a completely different language, and learning brand new customs. You know you can do this. There are countless examples of people who have come to America in droves since we became a nation. And, just as they took the tiger by the tail and built a brand new life for them and their children and their children’s children, so can you.

And, just so you know, we're counting on you. We need your unique gifts and talents. We need your new ideas and inventions. We need your input into how to continue to build our nation in this changing world. No one can bring to us what each of you brings. No one can replace you. Don’t lose hope when days challenge you. We all have them. You would have them no matter what country you live in. But, here in America, you know that things will get better. America has been the hope of people from other countries ever since we became a nation, and it continues to be that beacon of hope to new people every day. That’s why you came.

Today is the first day of that new life. Today is like no other day that you will every experience. The photos that you take and the memories you make for today will never actually do the day justice. But, from this day forward you will tell your children the stories of how you came to America and why. You are are making a new mosaic of your life. Some may call it a quilt or a puzzle. But, it will be totally different from anything you imagined before you came here. It’s up to you how it turns out.

We know you'll come through, just as generations of new citizens have for the entire life of America the Beautiful—America the land of the free and the home of the brave-- America…now and forever, your country. Happy Fourth of July, everyone!