REFLECTIONS: WHY DO WE COMMEMORATE 1848?
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On the occasion of the American Hungarian Federation of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.'s
commemoration of March 15, 1848

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!

As I was planning the program for this year's commemoration of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848 – 1849, a fleeting thought crossed my mind:

Why do we come together every Ides of March. Why are we not taking a walk in the park on the eve of spring or watching March Madness? Why do we instead sing Kossuth songs, recite the same poetry, listen to speeches about "old, dead, white men" (the reaction of students on this campus during the demonstrations in the 1960's and 1970's when they were required to study Western Civilization)? What "relevance," another term from the 60's and 70's, does all of this have for us today? Haven't we already and many times over heard the, "All for the people and all by the people. Nothing about the people without the people. That is Democracy, and that is the ruling tendency of the spirit of our age," words uttered by Lajos Kossuth over a decade before President Abraham Lincoln's famed "for the people, by the people" speech given at Gettysburg in 1863?

I quickly discarded these thoughts as I was reminded of Theodore Roosevelt's eloquent words when on April 2, 1910 in the Hungarian parliament he said, "There is no more illustrious history than the history of the Magyar nation. . . . The whole civilized world is indebted to Magyarland for its historic deeds."

And there are moments when Hungarian and American histories are inextricably linked, as today when both countries are NATO allies or when in 1849 Kossuth, known as the Champion of Liberty, was strongly influenced by America's Declaration of Independence as Hungary sought its own independence from Vienna. Kossuth himself noted, "The Declaration of Independence cast a ray of consolation over the injured land whose chief is a wandering exile for having dared to imitate you." And indeed, what a powerful model the American Declaration is:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . . That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

So then it becomes self evident that one reason we commemorate today is to preserve a proud heritage and honor those who by their actions wrote a history, to which, in Theodore Roosevelt's words, "the whole civilized world is indebted."

But there is another equally if not more compelling reason. Rackoczi, Szechenyi, Petofi, Kossuth, the Hungarian heroes (not just the foreign ones) who helped save lives during the Holocaust, Nagy Imre and the Pesti srac of 1956 and the democrats of twenty years ago who abolished an oppressive form of government, just to mention a few, guide and inspire us. The example of their principles and tremendous sacrifice for freedom, liberty and independence impose a special responsibility on us to help strengthen democracy, human rights and minority rights throughout the Danubian region by speaking up for the democratic values championed by Kossuth and the Hungarian patriots of the Ides of March.

Senator Joseph Tydings, the American Hungarian Federation's guest speaker on the occasion of our 50th anniversary commemoration of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, remarked, "[y]ou can't allow the flame of liberty to dim, flicker and die. Hungary needs your Federation. The United States needs a free and democratic Hungary."

These are the reasons we are here today.