



The American Hungarian Federation

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Is Kossuth Relevant Today?

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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, Dear Friends,

We come to the part of the program when we switch to English so that those who are not completely fluent in Hungarian can participate in our commemoration of Hungary's democratic revolution and war independence of 1848 - 1849.

I would like to thank you for joining us this afternoon. By participating you are continuing a tradition that extends back to Lajos Kossuth's highly acclaimed trip to the United States from December 4, 1851 until July 14, 1852.

Kossuth was only the second non-American to address the United States Senate and the House of Representatives, the first being the Marquis de Lafayette.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that it was the American Hungarian Federation that commissioned the bust of Kossuth and presented it to the American people for placement in our nation's Capitol.

From the moment he set foot on American soil, Kossuth was enthusiastically received. His reception in New York was only equaled by the reception that had earlier greeted George Washington and Lafayette.

During his extended tour of the United States, Kossuth delivered more than 300 public addresses and lectures, including his famous speech in which he stated, "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." These words were uttered by Kossuth over a decade before President Abraham Lincoln's famed "for the people, by the people" speech given at Gettysburg in 1863. Lincoln, who met with Kossuth, eloquently referred to Kossuth, as the "most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty on the continent of Europe."

The other day someone tried to convince me that commemorating the Ides of March had somehow lost its luster and relevance as Hungary is now a free and independent country. Are Kossuth and Hungary's noble quest for freedom really less relevant today?

I respectfully and vigorously have to say no for three reasons. First, Kossuth and Hungary's cause stood for the universal principles of freedom and democracy. These principles are as relevant to us as they were for the generations living in the 19th century; we must jealously guard them. As the late Tamas Lantos observed, "The veneer of civilization is paper thin. We are its guardians, and we can never rest."

Second, Kossuth inextricably ties Hungary and the United States together – his trip to the United States is part of the history of both countries and served to strengthen the emotional and historical ties of the two nations. As Hungarian Americans it is incumbent upon us to know this history and pass it on to our children so that these ties are never weakened.

Finally, Kossuth is a remarkable example for us to follow. Remember Lincoln's words, "most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty."

We still have unresolved issues to address, as liberal democracy has yet to grow strong roots everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, intolerance toward religious and national minorities shamefully and surprisingly still flourishes in some places.

One need only consider the Szekely flag dispute, the denial of the Hungarians' request for autonomy, or the alarming proposals to redistrict – that is eliminate the Hungarian administrative units – of the Szekely region in Romania; or the violence against Hungarians for speaking in their mother tongue in Serbia; or the discriminatory language and citizenship laws in Slovakia; or rising anti-Semitism; and I could go on.

And this is where Kossuth's championing liberty and democracy comes into play. We can, we must follow his example; we can, we must educate the public in our communities about these critically important matters. We can, we must educate to dispel faulty information about Hungary and Hungarian history; we can, we must vigorously support policies that will promote liberal democracy, civil societies and minority rights.

Kossuth and Hungary of 1848-49 are indeed relevant today!

Thank you.