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NEW ORLEANS CONSTITUTION BICENTENNIAL RECEPTION
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
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What a joy to be back in New Orleans to share this time with Governor Treen, and so many state and local officials and each of you as we salute the world's oldest living constitution.

I think it is important to put our celebration into perspective. The Constitution is not merely an artifact, to be saluted like the passing flags on the Fourth of July, or sealed under glass in a marble shrine. It is a timeless document with the same spirit and promise today as in the tense and uncertain summer of 1787. Henry Clay, one of America's foremost patriots, put it best, saying, "The Constitution of the United States was made not merely for the generation that then existed, but for posterity --unlimited, undefined, endless, perpetual posterity."

For over 200 years, we Americans have been bound together by shared ideals, by a love of home and family, a commitment to service and above all -- love of liberty. We crafted a government strong enough to protect our liberties -- but limited enough to keep from crushing them in its embrace.

There's a famous story about Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who once found himself on a train, but couldn't locate his ticket.

While the conductor watched, smiling, the 88-year old Justice Holmes searched through all of his pockets without success. Of course, the conductor recognized the distinguished Justice, so he said, "Mr. Holmes, don't worry. You don't need your ticket. You will probably find it when you get off the train and I'm sure the Pennsylvania Railroad will trust you to mail it back later."

The Justice looked up at the conductor with some irritation and said, "My dear man, that is not the problem at all. The problem is not, where is my ticket. The problem is, where am I going?"

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Where, indeed. Where are we going? This bicentennial year of the Constitution offers a special opportunity to ponder the meaning of that sacred document, and the challenge it poses to our own generation. The decisions we make today can affect the lives of other people as dramatically as the Founding Fathers have affected us.

Daniel Webster was not in Philadelphia in 1787. But no one studied the handiwork of Madison, Washington and Franklin with greater care. And the result of Webster's lifelong study was a warning to those who would come after him. "We may be tossed upon an ocean where we can see no land -- nor perhaps, the sun or stars," he said. "But there is a chart and a compass for us to study, to consult, and to obey. The chart is the Constitution."

As a people who have lived with freedom under the guidance of the Constitution for two centuries, we can forget how precious and rare that freedom is. All of us have an obligation to participate actively in the system of self-government the Constitution establishes. It is an obligation we owe not only to ourselves, but to the framers of our government -- men and women who risked everything for freedom, brave men and women who have bonded this nation with their blood and toil and sacrifice.

In closing, let me share with you an experience that Bob and I had when we visited the Soviet Union a few years ago for the U.S.-Soviet Trade Conference -- an experience I will never forget.

At our embassy in Moscow, I talked to members of two families from Siberia, who had sought asylum from the religious persecution they had encountered in their own mother country.

In attempting to reach our embassy's gates, one of the young sons was caught by Russian guards, beaten in full sight of the two families, and then dragged away. Only three weeks later did they learn that he had been thrown on a train back to Siberia. It was nearly five years -- separated from their friends and family and living in the basement of that embassy --before the Soviet government allowed those families to emigrate to Israel.

As we drove up to the airport to begin our long trip home and I looked at that airplane sitting on the runway with "United States of America" emblazoned on its side, I thanked God I could come home to a country where freedom and democracy are more than just hollow spaces.

Every citizen has a stake in government that lives up to its noblest promises. Each one of us is obliged to pass on to our children the freedoms that the men of Philadelphia entrusted to us. They created something unique in the annals of history. Let us not only preserve their past -- let us make certain that the present is worthy of preservation, so that in another 200 years, our descendants can say as proudly as we do today, "I am an American."