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Commonwealth of Virginia

...From my inauguration here in Colonial Williamsburg on a rainy day in January of 2006, to the inaugural sail of 'The Godspeed' in May, to a visit with many of you to England last year to Commemorate in December the 400th Anniversary of the sailing of the ships that arrived, to the weekend with Queen Elizabeth in May and the following weekend with the President, as we commemorated the anniversary. There has been one pinnacle moment after the next and I can't do anything but express how deeply, deeply I appreciate the work of all who have helped hold Virginia up as an example to the nation and to the world during this year. I think Virginia has show itself incredibly well, and it is because of you. So to all who participate let's have one more round of applause for the great effort.

All of the work, all of the sessions -- and there was a description of the sessions at the universities talking about democracy, but there were numerous events in virtually every corner of the Commonwealth. Every community was challenged to put on its event for the 400th Anniversary; in communities not just in Virginia but around the nation, and high school band members from around the nation, coming to participate in May. This was a big event and every aspect of it was in service of what I think is a wonderful bit of wisdom from William Faulkner. 'History is the effort to create a usable past.' If it is just about the past, if it is just about looking backward, there might be some interest in that, professional historians and others, but it's about more than that. It's about creating a path that is truly usable; Steve Adkins said this well -- usable so that we can create a better tomorrow.

The discussions for the next two days will focus on the biggest of topics, the future of democracy, that democracy that began at Jamestown in 1607. Powerful democratic institutions, principles and ideas came from those settlers or the generations that followed, who had brought with them from England traditions and principles that in this soil were able to grow and flourish: elected representation, the principle of the equality of all individuals, a recognition of the value of diversity, the power of freedom of religious worship, free enterprise -- the Virginia Company being a venture capital company from England. All of those institutions and ideas were present, in some way at the beginning, here in Jamestown and have flourished over the four centuries.

What is the future of these institutions and this democracy? There are large and powerful questions that you will grapple with over the next two days. I am not an academic or a student of democracy, but I am a passionate participant. And I have questions, I have concerns about democracy. If you watch TV, like late night like I do sometimes, you will see a product advertised that says, 'that you can set it and forget it.' Democracies aren't like that. You can't set them and forget them. You have to wrestle with them, and stresses and challenges continually appear, and there are stresses and challenges that I worry about today.

I wonder about a democracy where we have seen ever declining participation, in terms of people voting, over the last generations. Senator Warner, when my father-in-law was elected governor in 1969, about 65% of the registered voters in Virginia turned out to vote in that election. When I was elected in 2005 it was about 45% of registered voters that turned out. There had been a steady decline over the course of those 36 years, and that is a decline that is not unique to Virginia. You can look at it pretty much in any state in this country. If you telescope that out for the next 20 or 30 years, will we have to invent a new word to describe a form of

government that will have nearly universal suffrage, with only a minority of people choosing to participate? That is a topic that concerns me.

I am concerned about another topic that I know some of the elected officials here worry about, which is the cost of campaigns. One of the great advances in the Virginia democracy was overthrowing poll taxes that kept people from being able to vote because they couldn't pay dollars. The entry price for people being able to run as candidates these days is getting steeper and steeper and steeper, and that should cause us some concern. The tendency in politics to occasionally be confused and conflate dissent with unpatriotism, or lack of patriotism, is a concern in contemporary discourse; a concern in democracy, not in this country but elsewhere. And then there are broader questions about democracy in the future and the future of democracy abroad.

Democracy, most commonly in people's quick description, would connote majority rule. But majority rule can be a very terrifying thing to religious or ethnic minorities, or political minorities, and around the world as democracies grow; just as in this country, the protection of minority rights is very critical. Here's a question: Can democracy be exported? Can democracy be exported or is it something that has to be studied as an example, or can it be exported through a combination of example and force? That is a question we are wrestling with in this country and others, as we look and hope for the day when more countries will be truly democratic.

And finally, the notion of international institutions; democracy, in many ways, is a form of autonomy, a community autonomy. Do you give up that autonomy? Do you do something that isn't purely democracy when you inter into coalitions, large international institutions with other nations? No, democracy in its future cannot be set and then forgotten. There are ongoing

questions and controversies that are very significant and it will be these questions and others that will be the subject of the forum for the next few days.

Of course -- one large issue and we have a keynote speaker this evening who is perfectly suited to illuminate it for the future of democracy -- is the capacity of our society and others to arrange themselves by laws and rules rather than by the whims of whoever is ruler at a particular time. It's the rule of law that protects our homes and our properties, that enables civilian authorities to be in control of military units that have firepower and weapons. It's the rule of law that orders our economic activity, that protects public safety, and that protects the rights of minorities against what can often be capricious wills of majorities. We take that rule for granted in this country, but we have to acknowledge that so many in the world live in societies where the decisions are made by the whims of a ruler rather than by the democratically chosen rules and principles.

We take it for granted, but it is good to know that on occasion, when it is challenged, our nation has shown a willingness to step forward and protect the rule of law. Two instances came to mind, both dealing with very popular rulers. President Roosevelt, a popular, popular president. FDR decided that he didn't like the Supreme Court and wanted to expand it, to add more members to the Supreme Court. And even though he was popular president, that violated peoples' sense of fair play, and ultimately for a number of reasons, did not occur because even a popular president the people did not want to let him change the rules to his advantage.

A more recent example, in the days immediately after September 11, Mayor Giuliani was widely loved in New York City for his response, his compassionate response to the citizens, but when, in the midst of a mayoral campaign that was happening at the same time, there was some suggestion that the rule should change to enable him to run for another term.

Even those who loved his response quickly said, ‘no, we shouldn’t be changing the rules for a particular individual.’

Many in the world don’t have the ability to take that rule of law, that laws and rules have a primacy over personalities, for granted. There are cracks and stresses in the rule of law in our own society, attacks on judicial independence and other challenges.