

Washington's Birthday Speech
Old House of Delegates Chamber
Maryland State House
February 17, 2014

"Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you"

This is a quote from a Chinese fortune cookie I had saved in the box holding my business cards because for some reason, some day, I thought I might have cause to use it. You are now asking yourselves, "why today?"

Someone said to a friend of mine, "Nothing changes until you say 'yes.'" So true. Responding to a question in the affirmative often suggests that you have just been presented with a choice to do something, to affirm your opinion about something, or to change something when needed. By saying "yes," you have allowed yourself to become involved, to seek knowledge, and to be held accountable. Sometimes saying "yes" can be the most difficult, challenging and courageous answer to give. On Presidents' Day, we commemorate, we celebrate, we remember individuals who said "yes" and allowed trouble to trouble them.

On February 22, 1732, a male child was born to Augustine and Mary Ball Washington in Westmoreland county, Virginia, who allegedly, one fine day, chopped down a cherry tree, but undeniably, on another fine day, became the first president of the United States of America. We all know this was George Washington, but it bears repeating. Over the course of a divisive and bloody eight year war, this same Virginia native led a sometimes rag tag, but determined, force, the continental army, to ultimate victory and independence from great Britain. We all know this, but it bears repeating. Upon the conclusion of that conflict, General Washington walked through the halls of this hallowed house and stood within the walls of the Maryland Old Senate Chamber, and returned his military commission to Congress. He desired to return to Mount Vernon and enjoy a life of rest and domesticity. We all know this, but it bears repeating. Washington's retirement, however, was short lived. Once again, our nation needed his leadership and asked him to preside over the constitutional convention in 1787. When it ended, it became clear that his intellect, leadership skills, and virtues of humility and honesty made him the right person to become the first president under the new United States Constitution. Although it would take him away from his cherished Mount Vernon and simple life, Washington's strong sense of civic duty made him accept the responsibility and say yes. We all know this but, in tribute to his birthday, it bears repeating.

Years, months, or what might seem like eons ago, each of you put it into your head, or someone put it there for you, that you should emulate Washington's acceptance of accountability and consider representing the people. Subsequently, whether it was humbly or boldly, you absorbed that thought and allowed it to beat within your heart. And then, there was no turning back. Whether you imagined the magnificent eternal impact of a Lincoln or a Washington, the pioneering legacy of a Margaret Chase Smith or a Shirley Chisholm, or the warming personal influence of a teacher, coach, or parent, you decided it was your duty to lead. And as you recalled the lives of those admired figures, you recognized there could be hardships. You understood there might be disagreements and that effective civic discourse and compromise would, at times, be difficult. You acknowledged there may come a day when you look in a random mirror, in a random mall, at a random time, and say, "What was I thinking?" But, you knew saying yes would not be easy. Robert F. Kennedy once said, "About one fifth of the people

are against everything all of the time.” And in his infinite wisdom, Winston Churchill reminds you that, “Mountains inspire leaders, but valleys mature them.” Yet, despite these troublesome valleys, you accepted the position of civic leadership and now wield the solemn responsibility of being a servant of the people and sit proudly as members of Maryland's 434th General Assembly.

Take pride, President Miller, that you come from humble beginnings, born and raised in Clinton, Maryland, the eldest of ten children, the son of an educator and a small business owner. Through hard work and determination, you have become a scholar of jurisprudence, a distinguished civil servant, and a wise historian who analyzes events of the past to help guide your decisions for the future. Take pride, senators, that this legislative body has evolved from one of a single gender and race in 1776 to one that is now represented by both sexes and symbolizes, as my uncle Alex called it, the "salad bowl" of citizens who make up 21st century America.

Thank you, President Miller, for asking me here this evening; take pride that you and your distinguished colleagues have invited the descendant of an enslaved African, Kunta Kinte, who lived during the same time period as President Washington, to speak before you this evening. Who, in this historic building where the first United States president once stood, was able to gift a copy of that enslaved African's story, *Roots*, to the first lady of this country's first African American president. I am able to speak here tonight because many leaders throughout our nation's history have bravely said yes, like all of you, when change was difficult, but necessary.

Take pride senators, as stewards of our democracy, that you have recognized that our youth will become the future leaders of our government. Two years ago, both chambers unanimously passed legislation to help ensure that upon graduation, Maryland students will need to have mastered a foundational knowledge of important constitutional principles and an understanding of how our system of government works. Take pride in the scholarships you have awarded, the interns you have mentored, and the educational programs you have supported so that our posterity can learn and succeed.

Senators, you have said ‘yes’ and you have allowed troubles to trouble you, and because of that, we salute you. Remember, all of you in attendance tonight who have said ‘yes’ to a variety of challenging endeavors, that although Washington encountered some troublesome times during his presidency, he left the nation at peace and united. Let's remember Washington's legacy of unity and take pride that despite our differences we resemble a real family who bicker, disagree, laugh, cry and break bread together. Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, female and male, black and white, Catholic, Muslim, Judaic, straight and gay, ultimately and inescapably, we are one; we are Maryland; we are one Maryland.