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BY

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

AT

OPENING OF EXHIBIT ON THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

AT

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JANUARY 4, 1963

One hundred years ago today, in a nation torn by fraternal strife, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that all persons held as slaves in the area of rebellion "henceforward shall be free." He added, "Upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice ..., I invoke the considered judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

We cannot think that Mr. Lincoln invoked either that judgment or that favor in vain.

In the long course of the American commitment to freedom and dignity of the individual, no single deed has done more than Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation to redeem the pledge upon which this republic was founded -- the pledge that all men are created equal, are endowed equally with unalienable rights and are entitled equally to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Thus it is altogether proper that we gather on this day, one century later, we Americans, the heirs of Lincoln, to observe the placing of this historic document on exhibit here in the nation's capital for all to see. It is a moment to reflect on how far we have come in these hundred years toward the goal of equality and to appraise the problems and difficulties that still stand between us and that goal.

It is also a time to consider both our common responsibility toward achieving the promise of American life for all our citizens, and the implications of this document for an entire world, struggling everywhere for independence and equality and the full attainment of human dignity.

We have had a great deal of talk in this country in the past one hundred years about equality. Deeds, not talk, are what is needed. It is only relatively recently that we as a nation have again gathered our strength, our will, and our determination to act boldly and vigorously to lift from all our citizens the degrading burdens of intolerance, bigotry and discrimination.

We do so with the knowledge that the ideal of freedom has traveled a long and hard road through human history. Yet the record shows that the ideal persists and has an explosive power greater than that locked up within the atom. It shows that this ideal is the strongest motive of human action -- that it fortifies the human will in the face of adversity and force and terror -- and that the passion for equal rights for all is the ultimate weapon in the struggle for independence and human dignity.

Today we face a double challenge: achievement of our ideals at home and maintenance of our leadership among the free people around the world. Are not these two challenges really one?

We have the military means to meet and repel any adversary and we intend to maintain that lead in the future. Ours is a strong nation composed of industrious, brave people, who have always had a basic sense of justice. We have always had the courage, the will, and the military power to defend ourselves.

But while our freedom and the freedom of our allies depend upon our armed might now, both will finally depend upon our will and our ability to realize fully - and in fact - the ideals we claim to defend.

In this generation we have seen an extraordinary change in America - a new surge of idealism in our life - a new and profound reality in our democratic order. Much has been done. But much more must be done, first because it is right, and because in making equal opportunity a reality for all Americans, we make it a certainty for each American.

As Lincoln once said, "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free."

And we must do more because nations which are free and peoples who would be free, look to us for leadership - not merely in strength of arms but in strength of convictions. Americans are on duty today in South Viet Nam, South Korea, at the Berlin Wall, and around the world because the freedoms which Lincoln lived and died for belong to all men.

Other countries have discrimination, intolerance and bigotry, too. But because we are a free society - open for all the world to see - and because we ourselves were born of revolution, people of these lands look to us to see whether we can eradicate these plagues.

I have no doubt that we can. The energy which causes people from all sections of the United States to strive for fulfillment of the pledges of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation is essentially moral energy, and it has no end.

President Kennedy said almost two years ago:

"We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans - born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage - and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed and to which we are committed today at home and around the world."

Ladies and Gentlemen, we meet today to honor that commitment and this document that gave it both shelter and force.