

Address to Citizens of Dickinson

July 4, 1886

Dickinson, Dakota Territory

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Citizens of Dakota:

I must thank you most heartily for having extended, through your committee, the cordial invitation to address you today. One of the gentlemen was kind enough to say that if I did not come you would be greatly disappointed and I concluded to come.

One of the things I admire most in this country is the fresh open air, but I do not like to speak in a blizzard. I have had the pleasure of coming to Dickinson but once before. This time it is more cheerful than upon the previous occasion, for at that time I brought in three captives from the Killdeer mountains and was exceedingly glad to see the sheriff.

We are now doing in the Northwest exactly as our forefathers did in the east, when that famous Declaration of Independence was declared by those great men of America – building up free homes for ourselves and families, but under different circumstances.

Here we have a grand country, a territory that will make one of the grandest states in the union. The hardships of pioneer life in Dakota are not what they were in 1776.

There we were a people of 3,000,000, not a people bearing great political influence. We were a people of the coming years, considering our prospective political influence, and what was true of our forefathers then in the east is true of us now in the west.

It is not what we see, but what our children are to see and we, the people of today may not see Dakota in all her glory and grandness, but the people of coming years will witness the power and glory of this country in its fullness.

I am particularly glad to have an opportunity of addressing you, my fellow citizens of Dakota, on the Fourth of July, because it always seems to me that those who dwell in a new territory and whose actions therefore are peculiarly fruitful, for good and for bad alike, in shaping the future of the land, have in consequence peculiar responsibilities.

We have already been told, very truthfully and effectively, of the great gifts and blessings that you enjoy; and we all of us feel, most rightly and properly, that we belong to the greatest nation that has ever existed on the earth; a feeling I like to see, for I wish every American to always feel the most intense pride in his country and his people.

But, as you already know your rights and privileges so well, I am going to ask you to excuse me if I say a few words to you about your duties. Much has been given to us,

and so much will surely be expected from us; and we must take heed to use right the gifts entrusted to our care.

The Declaration of Independence derived its peculiar importance not on account of what America was, but because of what she was to become; she shared with other nations the present, and she yielded to them the past; but it was felt in return that to her, and to her especially, belonged the future.

It is the same with us here. We – grangers and cowboys alike – have opened a new land; we are the pioneers and as we shape the course of the stream near its head, our efforts have infinitely more effect in bending it in any given direction than they would have if they were made farther along.

In other words, the first comers in a land can, by their individual efforts, do far more to channel out the course in which its history is to run than can those who follow after them; and their labors, whether exercised on the side of evil or the side of good, are far more effective than if they had remained in old settled communities.

So it is peculiarly incumbent on us here today to so act throughout our lives as to leave our children a heritage for which we will receive their blessings and not their curses. We have rights but we have correlative duties; none can escape them.

We only have the right to live on as free men, so long as we show ourselves worthy of the privileges we enjoy. We must remember that the republic can only be kept pure by the individual purity of its members, and that if it once becomes thoroughly corrupt it will surely cease to exist.

In our body politic each man is himself a constituent portion of the sovereign and; if the sovereign is to continue in power he must continue to do right. When you here exercise your privileges at the ballot box, you are not only exercising a right, but you are also fulfilling a duty, and a heavy responsibility rests on you to fulfill your duty well.

If you fail to work in public life as well as in private, for honesty, and uprighteousness and virtue – if you condone vice because the vicious man is smart, or if you in any other way cast your weight into the scales in favor of evil, you are just so far corrupting and making less valuable the birthright of your children.

The duties of American citizenship are very solemn as well as very precious, and each one of us here today owes it to himself, to his children and to all his fellow Americans to show that he is capable of performing them in the right spirit.

You have been told that in the end we are to fall heir to most of this continent. Well, I think so myself; I hope to see the day when not a foot of American soil will be held by any European power. But we must meantime remember that we can only prove our fitness to hold sway over our neighbor's possessions by the way in which we rule

ourselves. It is not what we have that will make us a great nation; it is the way in which we use it.

I do not undervalue, for a moment, our national prosperity. Like all Americans, I like big things; big parades, big forests and mountains, big wheat fields, railroads – and herds of cattle too; big factories, steamboats and everything else.

But we must keep steadily in mind that no people were ever yet benefitted by riches if their property corrupted their virtue. It is of more importance that we should show ourselves honest, brave, truthful, and intelligent than that we should own all the railways and grain elevators in the world.

We have fallen heirs to the most glorious heritage a people ever received, and each one must do his part if we wish to show that the nation is worthy of its good fortune. Here we are not ruled over by others, as is the case in Europe; we rule ourselves.

All American citizens whether born here or elsewhere, whether of one creed or another, stand on the same footing; we welcome every honest immigrant, no matter from what country he comes, provided only that he leaves behind him his former nationality and remains neither Celt nor Saxon, neither Frenchman nor German, but becomes an American, desirous of fulfilling in good faith the duties of American citizenship.

When we thus rule ourselves we have the responsibilities of sovereigns not of subjects. We must never exercise our rights either wickedly or thoughtlessly; we can continue to preserve them in but one possible way – by making the proper use of them.

We should realize the dangers that stand around us and prevent and endeavor to guard against them and our children can keep in peace what our forefathers won in the war. They can keep the freedom won by our forefathers by our doing our duty.

The older of you have seen the heroic age of our American republic in the late rebellion and I do not think there is but one man who stands with Washington and that man was Lincoln, the rail-splitter from Illinois. When Fort Sumter was fired upon America sprang to her feet a queen among nations, and as Americans every American can be proud of the courage and patriotism displayed on both sides.

In a new portion of the country – especially cut here in the far west – it is peculiarly important to do right, and on this day of all others we ought to soberly realize the weight of the responsibility that rests upon us. I do not think that there are any people who should more feel the pride of citizenship, in the states, as those who are building up the great state of Dakota.

I am myself at heart as much a westerner as an easterner; I am proud indeed to be considered one of yourselves, and I address you in this rather solemn strain today only because of my pride in you and because your welfare, moral as well as material, is so near my heart.

