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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:

Friends,

We are gathered this evening at the beautiful headquarters of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Our European friends smile when they learn that one of the most conservative organizations in America is called the Daughters of the American Revolution.

It is one of the ironies that goes with being an American, and an American conservative. We inherit a revolutionary tradition.

The historian Clinton Rossiter wrote a book in the 1960s titled, *Conservatism in America*, but subtitled, *The Thankless Persuasion*. The United States is a revolutionary society, he wrote, constantly churning and changing, so that in this country the conservative is doomed to disappointment and defeat.

But, in answer to the historian, the United States is governed by the world's oldest and longest surviving written Constitution. Other advanced countries can make no such claim. All have been through several constitutional systems since our Constitution was ratified. America's dynamic society and stable constitutional order are two sides of the same coin.

A character in a Benjamin Disraeli novel posed a question to a friend, who happened to be a conservative: What will you conserve? His friend was not sure how to answer. He had not thought about the subject. It is still a good question: what will we conserve? We, those of us gathered tonight, have answered it in different ways.

I have done so myself over a long career, leaning this way and that, emphasizing at different times one or another of the strands of thought that make up the mosaic of conservatism in America. Like the nation it seeks to preserve, American conservatism is an exceptional enterprise.

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I began my career as an academic teaching at several institutions: Indiana University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Pennsylvania, educating or perhaps mis-educating many hundreds of undergraduates.

It was at Penn that I had my first real encounter with the Founding Fathers. I lived near Independence Hall; visited it frequently; reflected upon what happened there 200 years before. I read about Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton, none of them vagabond revolutionaries like Hitler, Lenin, or Robespierre, but accomplished lawyers, doctors, farmers, thinkers. It was a good thing that they had flaws, unlike many of their critics today: after all, they were dealing with real world problems.

Through that experience I became something of a constitutionalist, afterwards a conservative. This background (I thought) provided an answer to the causes taking root on campus: identity politics; attacks on the Constitution; disdain for free markets and business. Those causes advanced anyway, and have continued to do so. I saw where things were tending – and, so, I moved on.

By chance, through the intervention of friends, I was invited to join the staff of a fledgling foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation in New York, with interests in conservatism, free markets, and academic programs promoting our heritage of liberty and limited government. This was in the early years of the Reagan Administration. I knew little about the conservative movement, still less about charitable foundations. I learned quickly. I was fortunate to land where I did.

At that time, there was not all that much to what Ed Feulner called “the conservative movement:” a few think tanks, a handful of magazines, an academic program here and there. There were giants about, more so than today: Bill Buckley, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Milton Friedman, and, of course, Ronald Reagan. But the ranks were thin. The conservative revolution began with ideas, with thinkers and writers, and advanced outward from there.

The John M. Olin Foundation was blessed with a board of far-sighted and courageous trustees, business leaders all, and a dedicated staff of friends and colleagues. We had one virtue: like Socrates, we were aware that we did not know anything. Also: we had no clear plan. We had no idea who was right – the free market conservatives, the neo-conservatives, the cultural conservatives, the national security conservatives, the new right or the old right. Not knowing any better, we tried to help them all. If they succeeded, then we stayed with them.

We had allies – fortunately. The Bradley Foundation was there with us as a reliable friend. There were others: the Sarah Scaife Foundation, for example. But not many. The conservative movement was not awash in cash – far from it. That is still the case today. The progressive foundations outspend us by a factor of 20 or 30 to 1 – maybe more. We were undaunted by the heavyweight influence of the liberal foundations: we understood the urgency of our cause, which gave focus to the conservative movement.

Most of all, we were blessed by those talented thinkers and writers, editors, scholars, activists, organizers, refugees from the 1960s, many former socialists, and more, who approached us with their plans, seeking help and encouragement. In those years, in the 1980s and 1990s, they came in large numbers, and from different directions. Charitable foundations cannot succeed without such people. It was, in retrospect, a seedtime for the conservative movement, with new enterprises added year by year, too many of them to count. Many are still thriving toay.

The Olin foundation closed its doors in 2005, on instructions from its donor: a twenty-five-year adventure in conservative ideas. During that time, the conservative enterprise grew to such an extent that it could no longer be thought of as an insurgent movement, or even as a movement at all. There were elements in it, as some have said, that grew stale or stodgy. But it was now sufficiently broad and deep, with new people and organizations entering all the time, that it had the capacity to renew itself. And it has done so.

A few decades ago, two editors from *The Economist* published a book called *The Right Nation* – arguing this point: that conservatism in America was in fact "a nation within a nation." The United States was exceptional, they wrote, because of the strength of its conservative movement. Not only that: our brand of conservatism – patriotic, nationalistic, market oriented, skeptical of government – could be found nowhere else in the developed world, not in Europe certainly, nor anywhere else. We were alone.

That may have been true then, but not today, when we find flourishing but quite different conservative movements around the world, in Argentina and Brazil, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, and Poland where new conservatives are pushing aside traditional and less energetic conservative parties. It terrifies some, but inspires others.

These movements have evolved in ways we could not anticipate. They are more populist and anti-establishment than the conservative movements of past decades. Here, as conservatives awaited another Ronald Reagan, they were knocked sideways when Donald Trump came along. Something similar is happening elsewhere, too. Perhaps we should not be surprised: "*Out of the crooked timber of humanity, nothing entirely straight was ever made."*

Much has gone wrong, even as conservatives advanced. The universities are worse; schools are worse; Washington is worse. Uncontrolled immigration has destabilized Western societies. The federal government sits atop a $37 trillion debt. Liberals have left behind a tall agenda: to fix the problems they have caused.

John Kenneth Galbraith said in the 1960s: “These without doubt are the years of the liberal; almost everyone so describes himself.” No one would say that today. If liberalism and progressivism were the advancing doctrines for much of the 20th century, then conservatism may occupy that position in the new century. That is a singular achievement for an enterprise once described as “the thankless persuasion.”

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Next year we will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This is where I came in fifty years ago, in the midst of celebrations for the bicentennial.

I expect that those celebrations will be impressive and thought provoking. I hope they will be especially memorable for young people, many of them conservative in leaning though maybe unsure of their convictions, as I was when I was their age. We hope those celebrations will be sufficiently invigorating that in ten or twenty years hence—or perhaps in fifty years when the nation marks its 300th anniversary—when someone approaches them to ask that old question, “What will you conserve?,” they will have an answer ready at hand.

Thank you.