

ICAS Dinner Remarks December 14, 2016

First, let me thank Sang Joo and Synja Kim. Over the years ICAS has been a steady source of support not only for the relationship between the United States and Korea, but for those who care about American interests and policy in East Asia. They show what the steady, dedicated and good-natured work of one individual can accomplish.

And let me thank all my friends who have come tonight, and especially those who have spoken –you left out the embarrassing stuff, and you exaggerated the good stuff in the kindest way

The theme of this dinner is “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

This trio of exemplary “unalienable rights” is of course from our Declaration of Independence. These three rights, along with others, are what governments are formed to secure. The words have resonated down through the ages.

They appear, understandably, in the Japanese Constitution, written in 1946, which was written with heavy American participation. Article 13 states that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be the “supreme consideration in legislation and other governmental affairs.”

In 1980 the right to the pursuit of happiness was added to the Korean constitution, which already contained many safeguards for freedom.

Two years ago, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Abe of Japan issued a decision that expanded the conditions under which the Japan Self Defense Forces could participate in collective self-defense. One of those conditions was when an attack could “ overturn Japanese citizens’ constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

So in the United States these three are “unalienable rights,” and in Japan and Korea they are “constitutional rights.”

Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness the trinity is a bold and straightforward statement that it is the individual activities of the citizens themselves that matters. They are at the center of a country’s right to exist. It is the job of government to respect, safeguard and promote those activities of citizens.

There has been much hand-wringing of late about the state and the effectiveness of democracy in advanced democratic countries –

Populism growing in Europe, and in the United States with the election of Mr. Trump; corruption in the Korean presidency; slow growth in most countries and economic stagnation in Japan.

To a certain extent, the mature, advanced democracies are victims of their own success. The scale and the complexity of our countries – their governments, their economies and their social structures have grown far beyond the imaginings of the American Founding Fathers 250 years ago.

The sheer size and complicated natures of our nations make it difficult to govern by simple rules. When things get complicated,

there are opportunities for individual mistakes, for corruption, for disillusionment.

However, the fundamental truth and value of the touchstones of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness endure. Countries that believe in these concepts are different from and better places than countries that do not.

We need look no further than the countries that do not have those concepts in their bedrock. Two of them are in Asia – North Korea and China.

The extreme case – North Korea - does not even provide food for its people, much less life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. China, for its part, offers “party control, nationalism and the pursuit of economic growth.”

What is going on here in the United States is more the workings of democracy than its demise:

- Voters making choices that confound clever pollsters;
- Orderly but powerful expressions of massive dissatisfaction with the current state of the pursuit of happiness;
- Free and open discussion of the problems, and of every move of current and elected, soon-to-serve leaders.
- A million women on the march the day after the inauguration.

In Korea, the public indignation about the government has also caused a major change. The change is open and rowdy, not behind closed doors.

So for me, the hallowed words, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” exemplify the essence, the vibrancy, and sometimes the messiness of democracy.

They also put the burden of governing not on the government itself, as some independent force in a country, but on the people. In democracies, we pretty much get the government we deserve.

If we are to make our countries better, it is up to us. We the people must act.

So San Joo Kim and other friends again, many thanks for honoring me this evening. May life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness remain our touchstones for several hundred more years in the future of all democratic countries. May we find ways to keep those concepts relevant, vibrant and fresh.