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America's Reunion on the Mall

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From Kamuela, Hawai'i, and Ketchikan, Alaska; from Ponce, Puerto Rico, and Rangeley, Maine; from the rural heartland of Kansas, Missouri, and Tennessee; from our major cities of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, they have come to our Nation's capital. From the glamorous world of popular entertainment and from the neighborhoods of local communities they have come to the Nation's front lawn. Craftspeople representing the long-lived arts of America's cultural past have come, along with new immigrants whose artistic and cultural traditions will make their place in the history now being written. Cooks and storytellers, musicians, dancers, and artisans have come to this Festival on the Mall to tell, to sing, and to weave the story of America. Their artistry, skill, and talent, as immense as it is, is but a sample of the cultural diversity that exists throughout our land. That this diversity can be united, together, in the symbolic center of our nation, tells us much about who we are and what we dream.

The enlightened founders of this country conceived of a new nation in which the many could be united. We have always thrived as a nation of nations. This has not been easy to achieve. We have overcome many travails to

forge ideals of tolerance, mutual respect, and human dignity. We are still engaged in the pursuit of these ideals, yet, America stands as a beacon of hope. Here, cultural difference can be a source of strength not weakness, hope not despair, joy not sorrow.

A nation comprised of a diversity of people, communities, and cultural groups is a flexible and adaptable one. Ideas, inventions, songs, arts, even foods developed by some can be enjoyed by all. Never before in the history of humankind have so many different people from so many different places joined together in one nation. And never before has a nation accomplished so much politically, economically, socially, and culturally as ours. Our form of democracy, our freedom of expression, our concern for human rights and for the rights of the minority grow from our recognition of a diversity of origins, perspectives, and interests. The diversity of American lives has enriched our souls, our minds, our institutions, and even our senses.

We Americans are proud of who we are. We take pride in our own regional, ethnic, religious, and family identities, for these give us a sense of self. But we are all Americans first. Being American means bridging differences, not stamping



them out. It means learning from each other. It means including everyone as “us,” rather than excluding some as “them.” It means we can sing our own song, enjoy the singing of others, sing together, and even make up new songs. Some of the distinctly American forms of jazz, blues, gospel, and rock-and-roll heard at the Festival arose from just such a creative combination of cultural styles. Just as our recognition of the uniqueness of each and every individual does not detract from our sense of a common humanity, so, too, the recognition of our diversity need not stand in opposition to national unity and identity. Indeed, just as the creativity, genius, and generosity of individuals enlarge our sense of humanity, so, too, can an appreciation of our diversity increase our sense of national accomplishment.

It is fitting that we rededicate ourselves to joining together at this time and in this place. The Mall is the place where Americans talk to each other. It is where we celebrate and enshrine our national understandings. It is the place where some 30 years ago the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., informed the nation of his dream — of a nation in which children of different backgrounds, races, and creeds could walk hand in hand. Where the differences that divide could one day be used to unite. It is thus fitting that in the same place on this Day, and on Martin Luther King Day, for the inaugural and for the first public event celebrating a new administration, the American people gather here, to reunite with each other, to reunite with an American ideal, and to reunite with a national dream that all of us can help realize.