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KOSSUTH AND THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

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On the occasion of the American Hungarian Federation of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.'s commemoration of March 15, 1848

“All for the people and all by the people. Nothing about the people without the people. That is Democracy, and that is the ruling tendency of the spirit of our age,” said Lajos Kossuth before the Ohio State Legislature on February 16, 1852, over a decade before President Abraham Lincoln's famed "for the people, by the people" speech given at Gettysburg in 1863.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!

We have often heard or read Kossuth's remarkable statement. Perhaps we have heard it so many times that we gloss over it without noticing that it is a perfect definition of democracy or at least what democracy ought to be.

Kossuth's emphasis is on “all” the people; not some of the people; not on the elite; not even on most of the people. No! Kossuth's democracy is about all of the people. Little wonder that he is known as the “Champion of Liberty.”

In evaluating countries today, we tend to look at only one aspect of democracy – elections. Remember the purple thumbs in Iraq? Yet, suppose elections are free and fair, but those elected are not committed to the rule of law, to individual and minority rights, to freedom of expression, assembly and religion, or to the right to private property. Aren't we then left with of the "tyranny of the majority," as Tocqueville warned? Don't we end up with illiberal democracy instead of with the bundle of rights protected by constitutional liberalism, as Fareed Zakaria pondered in his November, 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”?

As we observe Central and Eastern Europe, we see free and fair elections. But is democracy as defined by Kossuth prevailing? Often the answer is “yes,” but are “all the people” considered when, for example, police rules and regulations are ignored, as we witnessed last October in Budapest?

Are “all the people” considered when Romania lavishly funds the Orthodox Church that is engaged in a church building spree, but fails to return to the rightful Hungarian owners the more than 2000 religious and communal properties illegally seized from them during the Communist era; or when Romania daily flouts the constitutional guarantee relating to the right to an education in the mother tongue; or when Romania fails to restore the independent Hungarian state university in Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvar or adopt a Law on National Minorities; or when it virtually treats the legitimate request for autonomy of the Szekelyland as an act of treason? Sadly, we could refer to other examples of illiberal democracies in the region that fail to fully respect the rights of their Hungarian minorities.

The sacrifices and commitment to freedom in 1848 and 1956, not to mention the champions of liberty such as Kossuth, have left Hungarians on both sides of the Atlantic especially sensitive to even the slightest backsliding of democratic practices.

Given their proud tradition and as the lessons of 1848 and 1956 teach us, Hungarians cherish freedom and liberty and have been prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve both. Consequently, Hungarians today have a special role to play and a special responsibility to strengthen democracy throughout the Danubian region, including in Hungary.

And consistent with their traditions, many Hungarian Americans stand ready to unequivocally, openly and loudly speak up for the democratic values championed by Kossuth and the Hungarian patriots of the Ides of March.

Senator Joseph Tydings, the American Hungarian Federation's guest speaker on the occasion of our 50th anniversary commemoration of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, remarked, "[y]ou can't allow the flame of liberty to dim, flicker and die. Hungary needs your Federation. The United States needs a free and democratic Hungary."

As Kossuth admonished, democracy must be for and by all the people, irrespective of nationality, religion or the language spoken. The rule of law, tolerance and the respect for the bundle of rights encompassed by constitutional liberalism, including minority rights, must be respected and promoted.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us rededicate ourselves to this noble quest when we leave our commemoration this afternoon.