

# BEDFORD POLE CAPPING, 2017

## REMARKS DELIVERED BY MARGOT FLEISCHMAN CHAIR, BEDFORD SELECTMEN

Good morning. I'd like to thank the Minuteman Company for the singular honor of serving as your Honorary Commander. In the year ahead, I will wear my tri-corn hat with great pride, as a symbol of our cherished tradition of remembering and acknowledging - through reenactment and education - the sacrifices that past Bedford residents made to secure our freedom.

Today, as we near the 242nd anniversary of Patriot's Day, I have felt called to reflect on those past townspeople, our original Bedford Minutemen, and what compelled them to act as they did.

The events of April 19, 1775 were precipitated by a series of grievances and alienations from a distant government, which were eventually cataloged in the Declaration of Independence. Among these were:

- a lack of respect for the rule of law
- interference with the administration of justice and the establishment of the judiciary
- imposition of taxes and restrictions on trade
- restrictions on immigration
- standing armies in times of peace,
- and most noxiously, the quartering of soldiers in private homes

Although many of these issues were economic, in their totality, these grievances stoked the fires of independence that erupted on that April morning, and started a momentous political revolution that led to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and eventually to the drafting of the US Constitution in 1787. (I am always proud to point out to my friends and family in other states that the US Constitution was based upon our Massachusetts Constitution, which, drafted by John Adams in 1780,

is the oldest functioning written constitution still in use.)

These documents established the principles of freedom, equality and self-determination that forged the national identity that we continue to claim today as the basis for our patriotism and national pride. As former President Jimmy Carter noted when he accepted the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, "*Constrained and inspired by historic constitutional principles, our nation has endeavored for more than two hundred years to follow the now almost universal ideals of freedom, human rights and justice for all....*"

These ideals, however, were undermined and tarnished by the original sin of slavery and the denials of freedom and personhood to Native Americans, women, and people of color that were written into our founding documents. Clearly, our national identity did not always include everyone: As the poet Langston Hughes so painfully and eloquently wrote,

*"America was never America to me...  
The land that never has been yet - And yet must  
be – The land where every man is free."*

We cannot look away from these grievous shortcomings, and it is not unpatriotic for us to face and name them.

But we are also able to appreciate how the values we cherish and seek to embody have strengthened and sustained our nearly 250-year-old democratic experiment through times of triumph and times of great distress, and still motivate us to rectify the mistakes of the past and work for a "*more perfect union*".

Today, here in Massachusetts and across the country, Americans of all walks of life are engaging with our government as never before, exercising the very freedoms that our founders enshrined in the Constitution - peacefully assembling and petitioning our representatives in the kinds of Town Hall meetings our Revolutionary forbearers would easily recognize, as well as via post-cards, and phone calls, Tweets and texts, which they certainly would not!

People who might never before have known their Congressman's name now have her number programmed into their smart phones on speed dial. We are living in an astounding time of awakening to the value of the democratic institutions that were forged in the crucible of 1775. Here in Bedford, we look to our cherished civic institutions: of Town Meeting - a form of direct democracy unheard of elsewhere in the country or the world - of neighborliness and volunteerism - of compassion and welcome to the newcomer, the stranger, the homeless child and her family.

We too are compelled to act, not just upon injustice and grievance, but on the opportunity to strengthen our resolve to be the community and country we were meant to be...based on values of equality, equal justice under the law, compassion, empathy and tolerance.

These are the American ideals that stoke the fires of our patriotism, and lead, as Daniel Webster once said

*"the sacred obligations which have devolved on this generation and on us to sink deep into our hearts."*

Daniel Webster spoke those words on the occasion of the dedication of the Bunker Hill Monument, a mere 50 years after the American Revolution, but they are as much true today as they were then. His voice rings through the ages to remind us that

*"there remains to us a great duty of defense and preservation; and there is opened to us also a noble pursuit to which the spirit of the times strongly invites us."*

I believe that many of us feel so invited...

I will conclude with words of Jeannette Rankin, who represented the State of Montana in Congress from 1917-19 and again from 1941-42, and who was the first woman to hold national office in the United States. She said:

*Deep down in the hearts of the American people is a living faith in democracy. Sometimes it is not expressed in the most effective way. Sometimes it seems*

*almost forgotten. But when the test comes, we find it still there, groping and aspiring and helping men and women to understand each other and their common need. It is our national religion and it prompts in us the desire for that measure of justice which is based on equal opportunity, equal protection, equal freedom for all.*

Langston Hughes's poem echoes this faith:

*America will be!  
An ever-living  
seed, Its dream  
Lies deep in the heart of me.*

I hope that if the Bedford's Minutemen of 1775 were with us here today, they would know how deeply in our hearts we hold dear the democracy that their sacrifice made possible, and would appreciate how their spirit and their example continue to motivate and inspire us - the people of Bedford - today.

Thank you.