*Title of Speech****:*** What Does it Mean to be an American Citizen?

*Given By****:*** The Hon. Lee H. Hamilton (former US Representative, IN-9)

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We are here today because the success of any democracy is determined by the participation of its citizens. Lincoln asked whether a nation devoted to the values of liberty, equality, justice and opportunity "so conceived...can long endure." In these words, he told us a truth about our democracy - that its survival is never guaranteed, and that its success demands wisdom, action and even vigilance from American citizens. Thus, I focus my remarks today on the basic question: what does it mean to be an American citizen?

*What do we owe?*

First, what do we as American citizens owe? We begin with gratitude. As many have said, the joy of being an American is the joy of freedom and opportunity. We have been bequeathed freedom, justice and opportunity from the deeds and commitments even the spilled blood of Americans who came before us. We did not earn the inheritance.

This nation of unequaled wealth and power, of freedom and opportunity, was given to us. But no matter how rich and powerful it becomes, America is not and never will be a finished project. It is always aborning *(being born)*.

You and I are handed a work in progress one that can evolve for good or for ill. American democracy makes a wager on its citizens. The deal is simple--with freedom comes obligation, with liberty comes duty. If that deal is not kept, democracy is threatened. Lincoln said at Gettysburg: It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. He spoke of a new birth of freedom so that government of, by and for the people would not perish.

You and I must learn and we must teach our young the words we live by: the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the other grand documents of American history. And we must learn and teach about the institutions that bring life and permanence to these words and deeds so familiar to us, so that they may fulfill Lincolns charge.

Democracy is not fixed like a monarchy. It is dynamic. Democracy reflects the will and above all the action of each generation of American citizens. So what do we owe? As Americans we owe a profound debt of gratitude for the actions of those who preceded us, and we owe those who will follow an America that is even greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

**1. How do you interpret the underlined sentences? Do you agree or disagree with what the speaker is**

**saying? Explain thoroughly.**

**2.Explain:** *“Democracy is not fixed like a monarchy. It is dynamic.”*

*Why are we concerned?*

But I am concerned, as I know you are. Why are we concerned?

We are concerned because too many Americans lack a basic understanding of our democracy our institutions, our representative democracy, our obligation to those who came before, and what each of us can and must do to preserve the blessings of

liberty.

A multitude of surveys confirm our concerns. But we don't even need to look at surveys or statistics to know that political participation and civic engagement is down basically across the board. People are voting less; paying less attention to their civic responsibility; ignoring the great lessons of the American experiment; participating less and complaining more.

There is a sense, particularly among many young people, that being an American citizen is no big deal, with no obligation attached to it an endeavor not particularly worthy of their time and talent. I know of young people in Indiana who when asked about the meaning of Memorial Day respond by saying that it is the day that pools are opened, or the occasion for the Indianapolis 500 auto race.

All of us are aware of a disconnect between people and their elected representatives. People do not trust them. People think they do the bidding of powerful interests. People think they are not relevant to their day-to-day lives. People think that citizenship is hollow.

You and I are concerned because we know that if we are apathetic, passive, and cynical about our democracy, then we will invite leaders who abuse power. There is an old observation: a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves.

You and I are concerned because we stand on a precipice. If American citizens increasingly become disengaged, then the entire American democratic enterprise is at risk. Indeed, sometimes I wonder about whether our democracy can continue as we know it if civic participation continues to decline as it has.

**3. Why is Hamilton concerned? (Be specific and list your understanding of some of his concerns.)**

**4. Do you agree or disagree with his concerns?**

**5. Does YOUR “CQ” prove Hamilton’s concerns true or false?**