

**Remarks by Gary T. Johnson, President, Chicago History Museum,
at the celebration of Independence Day, July 4, 2012
(following the reading of the Declaration of Independence)**

Each year, something in that reading catches my ear. This year, I would ask you to consider the long and graphic list of grievances you just heard against King George III and against what the drafters called “our British brethren.” In the context of that list, it is no surprise that in 1812, unfinished business remained between the British and the young American nation.

This bicentennial year is a good time to brush up on the history of the war that ensured, the War of 1812. In the United States, this largely “forgotten war” is remembered in certain places, such as Baltimore – for Fort McHenry, and of course in Chicago – for Fort Dearborn.

But I also call your attention to the banner flying this year on the Canadian Embassy in Washington. It says: “War of 1812, Celebrating 200 Years of Peace.” It turns out that our neighbors to the north had their own list of grievances! It truly is remarkable that two neighboring countries that were involved in two wars over one generation later achieved a record of peace lasting, so far, almost¹ 200 years. Thank you.

¹ The Treaty of Ghent, ending the war, was signed in December 1814, but in North America, fighting continued into 1815.

**Oration by Michele Smith
Alderman of the 43rd Ward of the City of Chicago
Delivered at the Chicago History Museum's Uihlein Plaza
July 4, 2012**

**Introduction by Gary T. Johnson,
President of the Chicago History Museum**

Now I would like to introduce today's guest speaker. She has made Lincoln Park her home for over thirty years. She is a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School and has served in the Office of the United States Attorney. Since 2007, she has been the 43rd Ward's Democratic Committeeman, and since last year, she has been doing an outstanding job serving her constituents and the city as alderman. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to give you our friend ... Alderman Michele Smith!

“American Independence and Local Government”,

An Oration by Michele Smith

Good morning. Thank you to President Gary Johnson and the board of the History Museum, and our other distinguished guests today. I'm delighted that the History Museum continues its wonderful tradition of having a local Independence Day celebration, and look forward to many more.

We've just heard the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and its listing of grievances. When we hear the complaints of the colonies – of military occupation, taxation, and dissolving local legislatures, the theme is – “we want to be heard” and “we want to decide.” We, these American colonies, want to, and have the right to, govern *ourselves*.

Today's holiday celebrates the formation of a new nation. But I'd like to argue that in fact, the *bedrock* of American democracy is *local* government. I believe the ideas we most cherish – freedom of speech, the right to seek redress from the government, come from, and live on today in local government. And I'll start with a painting.

One of the most iconic images in America is the Norman Rockwell painting Freedom of Speech. Rockwell created this painting in response to Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, at a time when there was very real fear that Nazism and the dictator Hitler might dominate the world.

Rockwell sought an image that epitomized this most precious American freedom. But he didn't paint a picture of a street demonstration or a rally for a national cause. Instead, he created a picture of a single man rising to express his opinion at a meeting. And while we are not sure exactly *where* the meeting is being held, we do know the *subject*. Look more closely at the picture. There is another man, holding a document and it is - his town's annual budget.

Rockwell knew that *this* type of speech and the right to help govern the place that *immediately* surrounds you - is at the *core* of what the founder's fought for. As historian John Teaford wrote, “The basic unit of both urban and rural government in New England was the town. . . New Englanders had grown accustomed to the freedom of commerce and the privilege of direct participation in town meetings.” The first steps of the American revolution *actually* occurred in small towns like Great Barrington and

Lexington, Massachusetts, where the residents themselves forced the resignations of every Crown-appointed official and *took back their towns*.

This tradition of local self-government and freedom of expression is alive and well today. When people ask me what an alderman does, I reply, “your alderman is responsible for the entire physical environment around you. When you step out of your house – the streets, sidewalks, trash, lights, development and buildings around you – those are my responsibility. And I advocate for you about your schools, the police, zoning, and on top of that, get to help shape a budget and make decisions about the future of our city.”

But what is so uniquely *American* about my job is that I am *directly* accountable to the people. The alderman is the public official closest to the people. There are a whole lot of layers of government between me and say – the President.

When we need to decide things in our community, we do so by directly going *to* the people, or by having the people *directly come to me*. In Chicago, as you know our tradition – if you have a complaint, question or concern about just about anything – *go see your alderman*.

And they do come, individually and in groups, another great American tradition also. That first great observer of American Democracy, Alexis De Toqueville, found that strong local institutions and citizens’ enthusiastic participation in these organizations were a distinctive and essential part of American democracy. He said, "The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons and schools."

Today, in this one ward are ten neighborhood groups, 14 committees to support and fund every local public, private and parochial school, 12 playground committees, children’s baseball and soccer leagues, at least 30 local churches and the organizations that support them, the committees that support our local and wonderful city-wide institutions, like this very museum, the zoo, the nature museum, and DePaul University. Every theatre and arts organization is supported by an enthusiastic group of volunteers and a fund-raising board. We have boards that run everything from our local chambers of commerce to the homeless shelter.

When I look around the ward, I see the hand of federal and state government to be sure – Lake Shore Drive and LaSalle Drive were repaved with federal and state dollars. But the garden behind us was put in by the Lincoln Park Conservancy and Gold Coast Neighbors. The bricks on the parkway in Old Town were put in by the Old Town Triangle Association. The playground at Oz Park was hand-built by the neighbors. All around us changes have been made because the neighbors decided to do it, and they got their alderman to make it happen.

And when any group of neighbors wants a stop sign, or a playground, or wants to stop a bar from coming in, they let me know – by giving me a petition. When we talk today on the 4th of July about the right to petition the government, we use that *right* literally, and *often, right* in this neighborhood. And the people petition the government – as represented by - me.

I help make those community decisions by listening to the people – by responding to their petition, or by holding neighborhood town hall meetings, where everyone has a voice – just like the man in the Norman Rockwell painting, and just like the people in those small New England towns so many hundreds of years ago.

And on an even more intimate level, neighbor to neighbor, our American values shine. Benjamin Franklin wrote that “Justice is as strictly due between neighbor nations as between neighbor citizens.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote that one of the functions of education is “To understand [our] duties to [our] neighbors and country.”

Our American values require that we respect our neighbors and have obligations to them. The relationship of a neighbor to a neighbor is not necessarily a personal one – it’s actually a political and civic relationship. And every day, as alderman, I help our neighbors negotiate the political relationship we have to each other.

What we take for granted as the backbone of civic participation *is in fact what distinguishes us* from the rest of the *world*. People protesting in Egypt, Syria and Thailand want the same right we have to improve their neighborhoods and their lives.

Some political scientists and other commentators on television argue that the American sense of community has eroded – that *community* values have been overshadowed by

individual choice and *self-interest*. And certainly there has been a long backlash against social programs, and even, some would say, against the middle class.

But while I deeply disagree with those in national politics who claim that there is *no* role for government, I am optimistic about our communities. Here in Chicago, local government thrives – with a mayor who believes in implementing national policies on a local basis, and with a neighborhood like mine, where the people make their voices heard and are actively involved in local decision-making.

As the founding fathers said in the Declaration of Independence, Americans want to be heard, and they want to govern themselves. So on this day when the greatest country on earth was founded, I salute my neighbors, whose active participation does our country proud.

And remember, as the legendary speaker of house, Tip O’Neill, famously said, “All politics is – local.”

Thank you very much. God Bless America.