

Madam Chair and members of the committee, it's an honor to speak before you today.

Nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, in the midst of the Civil War, when the nation's very existence hung in the balance, Congress and President Abraham Lincoln nonetheless enacted legislation that would reverberate to the most distant generation. They set aside the exquisite Yosemite Valley and magnificent Mariposa Grove of sequoias in California, instructing the state to protect it from commercial development forever.

For the first time in human history, a large tract of natural land was preserved, not for the exclusive enjoyment of royalty or the rich, but for *everyone*.

Eight years later, in 1872, a wonderland of geysers in Wyoming Territory, at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River, was likewise set aside – but since there was no state to entrust it to, Congress instead designated it as a "national" park.

This, too, was something new in the history of the world. And it set in motion an idea that has now been copied by virtually every other country on the globe, becoming, like the idea of liberty, one of our greatest exports. (I should note that the idea spread quickly to California, as well, where Yosemite was soon transferred back to the federal government for better protection as a national park.)

In titling our PBS documentary film, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, we borrowed from writer and historian Wallace Stegner, who said that national parks are "the best idea we ever had." We acknowledge some hyperbole in this. The idea imbedded in our Declaration of Independence -- that all human beings are "created equal" and possess the inalienable rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" -- unquestionably ranks higher. But that idea is what *created* our nation. Once the nation was formed, it's hard to think of an idea that came from our government any better than the national parks.

The parks, in fact, spring from the same source. They *are* the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape. Theodore Roosevelt, the greatest president in our history for the cause of conservation, noted what he called their "essential democracy. . . the preservation of the scenery, of the forests . . . and the wilderness game for the people as a whole instead of leaving the enjoyment thereof to be confined to the very rich."

A generation later, another president named Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, said "there is nothing so American as our national parks," that they are "the outward symbol of this great human principle . . . that the country belongs to the people."

At this particular moment in history, it's worth noting that during Roosevelt's time in office, the nation was facing the worst economic crisis of the 20th century – and yet, under his leadership, the national parks prospered. The Civilian Conservation Corps made improvements at virtually every park. New parks were created. And park attendance went up, not down.

Roosevelt himself made a number of well-publicized visits to the parks – which, because of his handicap, he had to enjoy from the back seat of his touring car. But he constantly encouraged other Americans to follow his example, to see for themselves these spectacular treasures that belonged to them.

He declared 1934 the "Year of the Parks," had the Postal Service create special stamps with park scenes on them, funded WPA artists to make posters promoting park tourism – and he hired the photographer Ansel Adams (for \$22.22 a day) to tour the parks and capture pictures that would inspire Americans to appreciate the legacy they had inherited. (Adams, by the way, said that paying him to travel to every national park was "one of the best ideas ever to come out of Washington.")

Like the two Roosevelts, the first director of the National Park Service, Stephen Mather, understood how the parks reflected the core promise of America. In fact, he called them "vast schoolrooms of America, where people are . . . learning to love more deeply this land in which they live." Inspired by John Muir, Mather also understood that parks are, as Muir said, "places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike." In his darkest moments, Mather had always found solace and renewed energy from visiting a national park.

But Mather was also a businessman, a tireless promoter who had previously made Twenty Mule Team Borax a household name. He recognized that the parks could be a powerful economic engine – for the nation, and for the states and towns near them – and he made the most of it.

He worked with the railroad companies to encourage Americans to "See America First." He joined with automobile clubs and good-roads associations to lobby for improved highways to the parks that would unleash what he called "the great flow of tourist gold" into every community along the routes. He invited publishers and journalists to accompany him on camping trips, where he preached his gospel of the parks around the campfire and urged them to spread that gospel in their newspapers and magazines.

The United States, Mather said, "possesses an empire of grandeur and beauty, . . . the most inspiring playgrounds and the best equipped nature schools in the world." And they constituted, he said, "an economic asset of incalculable value."

Madam Chair, members of this committee, we should listen to these voices from our history.

As Stephen Mather reminds us, national parks are an economic asset – and therefore deserve all the investment and support they can get, if only for the sake of boosting the balance of trade or the bottom line of the nation's finances.

As Franklin Roosevelt tells us, even in times of economic distress, the parks are worth promoting, defending – and expanding. They are good for business, but equally good at providing much-needed, affordable recreation during hard times.

And as Theodore Roosevelt urges us, national parks are part of our "essential democracy." "Our people," he added, "should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

"We are not building this country of ours for a day," Roosevelt said. "It is to last through the ages."

National parks are not only America's best idea. They are the best investment this Congress can make.

Thank you.