

A toast to Ayaan Hirsi Ali on her fortieth birthday  
November 12, 2009  
Christopher DeMuth

Today is not only Ayaan's fortieth birthday but also three-and-a-half years from the day she declared that she was coming to America. She had already decided to move here one day but then received a hard shove from the Dutch government (which revoked her citizenship) and judiciary (which ruled that Dutch citizens have a human right to her absence from their neighborhoods). On that day in May 2006, when she announced that she was resigning from the Dutch Parliament and accepting an appointment as a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, Ayaan Hirsi Ali became the first citizen of a modern nation to be exiled for reasons of political convenience.

Here are a few of the things that Ayaan has done since that day: caused the Dutch government to fall; been welcomed to the United States by the Deputy Secretary of State and presented with her Green Card by the Secretary of Homeland Security; written a book in her sixth language of English that became a world-wide best-seller with sales that even Niall Ferguson would envy; received innumerable awards for literature and moral courage and even had a Dutch tulip named after her; electrified audiences across the United States and in Europe and Australia; been lionized by prominent conservatives and prominent liberals; been condemned by prominent conservatives and prominent liberals; been compared to a chameleon, Joseph Conrad, and Joan of Arc; received serious death threats from radical Islamists; been surprised by a breaching humpback whale while working on her next book, *Nomad*; and learned to water ski and to make s'mores over a campfire (this last being the true initiation into American citizenship).

She has also become a cherished friend to many of us in this room. To us, and to many who know her less well, and to many more who know her only through her work, Ayaan is an inspiring and magical presence.

Much of the inspiration comes from her past. The recent 3½ years were nothing like her previous 36½ years for hardship, resilience, accomplishment, and heroism and nobility which are the source of the intense public interest in her. And Ayaan comes from a culture where the past is revered. She can recite her genealogy back fifteen generations. Her native religion is transfixed on events that took place centuries and millennia ago.

But Ayaan's magic comes not from her past but from her present and her future. It is astounding that a little girl in Somalia and Saudi Arabia was able to piece together for herself the fundamentals of human freedom and the possibilities of human reason. More significant is that, having escaped to the West, she diligently sharpened her understanding of freedom and reason and threw herself into their active defense and became their ardent champion and teacher. Many an immigrant has appreciated our freedoms more intensely than the natives who grew up with them—but none has challenged the natives more insistently to defend, extend, perfect, and make worthy use of our freedoms. Ayaan has discovered that within the West there are many advocates for a milder form of the same primitive scourges she fled from—for state coercion over individual liberty, for hierarchy over spontaneity, for doctrine over truth, for enthusiasm over skepticism and open-minded debate. Some of us sometimes feel that we are on the losing side of history. And this is where we are confronted not by Ayaan the young rebel of the past but Ayaan the mature, seasoned, vigorous woman of today—in the arena, insisting that free men may not be so resigned, that our future is ours to make. We are compelled to listen because she has made her own future, and is continuing to do so right before our eyes.

So let us celebrate not only Ayaan's first forty years but what she has become today and what is to come for her. Let us raise a toast to her good health, prosperity, long life, and every happiness.