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How to Think About America's 250th Birthday

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The 250th anniversary of the American founding invites us to consider how to incorporate knowledge about the American Revolution into the education of Americans, in particular the civic education of young Americans. Whether that process might itself be revolutionary, whether it might involve entertaining a new way of thinking about what to do in the field of education, is inevitably part of this question.

One beginning assumption shared by many if not most Americans is that in some way the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence have always been fundamental to our understanding of what America is or what America aspires to be. That assertion may seem so obvious as to be incontestable. But it can present us with a problem if there is not a fairly universal consensus as to what the Revolution was and what it meant, both in its own time and in ours. And if you ask my fellow historians, they will agree on only one thing: that there is no universal consensus. In fact, historians have had lively and consequential debates on these matters for at least the past century.

It would require a bibliographical essay of considerable length to chart all the perspectives that have been on offer, but much of it boils down to the famous dichotomy expressed by the historian Carl Lotus Becker in 1909 between the Revolution understood as a dispute over home rule and the Revolution as a dispute over who would rule at home.[1] Or, more generally, it has been a dispute between interpreting the Revolution as a primarily elite political affair, in which formal political ideas played a central role, or as a burgeoning social revolution, at times bordering on civil war, which (it was hoped) would lead the new country in the direction of a more democratic and egalitarian society—or perhaps fail to do so, thereby leaving the Revolution's potential unfulfilled.

This debate is well worth having, along with its many variants and ancillaries, because it brings out the multifaceted aspects of the American Revolution. We will continue to seek out the Revolution's meanings and debate them precisely because the Revolution is and remains so powerfully central to us as a signal event in which our identity as a people is planted but whose abundant meaning overflows any single attempt to capture and confine it.

That is not how everyone sees the matter, though. In fact, the historian Michael D. Hattem, in an interesting recent book called *The Memory of '76*, has argued that our reliance on the Revolution as a source of national identity and self-definition—he calls the Revolution our "origin myth"—has caused us more trouble than it has been worth. As he puts it, while "the popular memory of the Revolution has been an important vehicle through which Americans have defined and voiced their understanding of the present and their hopes for the future," our origin myth "has been consistently contested" and has shaped conflicts "over partisanship, regionalism, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion." He concludes that "remembering the nation's founding has often done far more to divide Americans than it has to unite them" and that "revising the past is an important and long-standing American political tradition."[2]

Taken together, those last two statements would appear to be a bad omen for the forthcoming semiquincentennial of America's birth. Are we to ignore our past or reinvent it? Is that really the choice before us?

Well, this is not the time or place for a book review. But at the risk of failing to do justice to Hattem's book, I would point out two things. First, he does not propose an adequate alternative to our "contested national origin myth."[3] If one is going to introduce anthropological reasoning about these things, one ought to be consistent about it and not use anthropology exclusively as a tool of debunking. If societies need origin myths, then that is a need that cannot be ignored.

Second, it is just possible that a pattern of contestation is not a bug but rather a feature of a free society. It is possible to revere Thomas Jefferson, as many do, yet celebrate living in a society in which Jefferson can be openly derided and even despised as a hypocrite, spendthrift, dilettante, domestic tyrant, racist, and what have you, as many do. Perhaps having a "contested national origin myth" is not such a bad thing if you are interested in having a free society.

What is more, a pattern of contestation is arguably present in all great modern revolutions that have had a lasting impact. On the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, in 1989, we found out just how ambivalent the French are about the meaning of their own revolution, the iconic modern revolution. Yes, the French nearly all embrace republicanism, which they love so much that just one republic has proven to be not enough for them; there have been five so far, and we are still counting. This is yet another reason why Zhou Enlai's famous statement popularly misunderstood to be in response to a question about the success of the French Revolution—that "it's too early to say"—has lasted so long. Even as apocryphon, the statement carries a certain resonance, a certain plausibility.

But I don't think it would be justifiable to say it's too soon to tell whether the American Revolution has been successful. There is something unique about the role the Revolution has played in American culture as both an agent of stability and an energizing reference point. This paradoxical quality of "the spirit of '76" is made evident by the fact that one of the most conservative organizations in the United States is called the Daughters of the American Revolution. It is also evident in the formulation, favored by liberals, that we have an "unfinished" Revolution. The point is that Americans have looked on the essential character of the Revolution as something to be conserved, protected, revered, and continued. Even amid our modern polarization, we can and should look upon it the same way today.

History as Soulcraft

The propensity to venerate a revolution is not unique to Americans. In 1809, William Wordsworth famously wrote about the French Revolution as it had appeared to its enthusiastic contemporaries:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
> In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
> Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
> The attraction of a country in romance![4]

But, of course, that ecstatic, romantic dawn did not last, not for France, and not for Wordsworth.

For most of the 20th century the dominant political party in Mexico was known as the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Yet for most of its history that party was as ossified and unrevolutionary as the meticulously preserved corpse of Vladimir Lenin, which has been on display in Moscow's Red Square for over a century. This is perhaps what an institutionalized revolution is destined to look like.

The problem, then, is this: How do we keep the energy of revolution bottled up and yet vital? How do we avoid that descent from aspirational charisma into corpse-cold routinization, the fate Max Weber saw as the eventual fate of all energetic political activity?

Abraham Lincoln worried over a similar problem in his youthful 1838 speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, which he titled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." He lamented how the American Revolution's energetic spirit was being overtaken and negated by the growth of lawlessness and violence. The Revolution didn't need to be fought all over again; instead, it needed to be recalled and preserved. Lincoln traced the need for a form of civic education—what he called a "political religion"—centered on inculcating "reverence for the laws" and devotion to reason as keys to the steady perpetuation of our institutions.[5]

We can take Lincoln’s thoughts as a starting point in answering this problem for ourselves. If the “spirit of ’76,” the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, is to be preserved, perpetuated, and perhaps revived, education will have to play a central role. A civic education, an education for republican citizenship grounded in historical knowledge and historical memory, is essential.

And here I must add a personal note. When I was in the process of writing *Land of Hope*, meant as an alternative to the American history textbooks on offer, I happened to have dinner with a then-new friend, an Orthodox Jew and highly accomplished attorney from a white-shoe law firm in New York, who was interested in talking with me about the book. In the course of a lengthy conversation, so lengthy we closed the restaurant down, he said something that made a deep impression on me. “I believe,” he offered, “that if our children are taught that they live under a bad regime, it does damage to their souls.”

I have not been able to forget his words. And they made me think of the inattention given by those of us who write and teach American history as a profession to the soul-forming aspects of our work. I have sometimes asked colleagues who write in highly critical ways about the American past whether they have any concerns along these lines. The answer I hear is almost always the same: “That’s not my job.” Just as the surgeon does not have a responsibility to discern the worthiness of the one whose life he saves—and one can be thankful for such professional ethics—so the historian should be guided by the search for truth and nothing else, letting the chips fall where they may, cultivating a critical disposition toward all claims made by and for the past.

But that is an inadequate and, I fear, self-serving comparison. A republican form of government cannot exist for long if it does not elicit the loyalty and love of its citizenry. An education that refuses to address these needs and serve them on a firm and truthful basis will undermine a republic rather than support it. Doing those things is somebody’s job. Perhaps America’s 250th is the right time to begin thinking about that fact.

The Work of Memory

Looking forward as a nation necessarily means looking backward and remembering. Edmund Burke was getting at this when he famously remarked that "people will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors."[6] Our celebrations in 2026 must involve looking back to the first Fourth of July in 1776, the date on which the United States' status as a free and independent nation was proclaimed to the world. The Declaration of Independence stands at the center of our emergence as a distinct and distinctive people. It produced the enduring flame of the American Revolution, firing the imaginations of the brave men and women who fought to make this country possible against tremendous odds and who saw to it that it would become a beacon to the world.

The study of history has many uses, but primary among them is the work of memory. No great or enduring human enterprise can be sustained without it. No matter how determined and focused we are, we are sure to lose our way unless we regularly look back and reorient ourselves, remembering where and how and why we began, remembering our connection to what came before us, particularly to those people who came before us. Without those points of reference, we not only forget the succession of historical events and the names, places, and stories that form the warp and woof of our common life. We eventually forget who we are.

Let me offer an example to explain what I mean by that rather dramatic statement. The example is drawn not from American history but from a practice begun in the ancient Near East and continuing to this day.

The Passover seder is a ritual meal at the heart of Judaism that involves an annual retelling of the story of the Israelites' miraculous liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt, taken from the book of Exodus in the Bible. The seder itself is based on the biblical verse commanding Jews to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt: "You shall tell your child on that day, saying, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'"[7] It is a story of grateful liberation, a story that defines a people, a story that has helped them remember who they are, year in and year out, through many centuries of tribulation.

The story of the Exodus has been a central part of Western civilization, taking many forms along the way. When it came time for the new United States to design its Great Seal, Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson urged that it should depict the miracle of Exodus and bear the slogan Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God. Even though it was not adopted, alas, Franklin and Jefferson's design showed an understanding of what Americans most needed to remember about who they are: a free people, under God.[8]

Remembering who we are is not something that comes automatically. And what happens when we are no longer able to manage it? Alzheimer's disease is perhaps the most dreaded affliction of our time. It is dreaded because, by robbing its victims of their memories, it also robs them of their fundamental identity, their very sense of who or what they are. Too many of us today have had the unsettling experience of looking into the eyes of a loved one afflicted with this awful disease and being unsure whether the person we once knew so well is still there behind the eyes, whether he is even capable of remembering who he is or recognizing who we are and the lifelong relationship that has subsisted between us. Without the capacity for memory, such a loved one soon slips away from himself, from us, and from our shared world and finally vanishes into a fog of unknowing.

What is true for individuals is also true for nations and peoples. What memory is for individuals, history is for civilizations. Without the reference points provided by historical memory, we soon forget who we are, and we perish.

Yet there is a crucial difference here. No one can be blamed for having contracted Alzheimer's, an organic condition whose causes we still do not understand. It is not a choice. But we, the American people, can be blamed if we fail to know our own past and fail to pass that knowledge on to the rising generations. We will be the ones responsible for our own decline. And our society has come dangerously close to that state, having lost a general grasp on the larger trajectory of our own history.

The fear that we might lose our national soul by forgetting who we are and where we came from is not something new. The young Lincoln expressed that same anxiety in the Lyceum speech, when he worried that as Americans' memories of the Revolution faded away, so, too, would the underpinnings of the republic itself, the "temple of liberty" that the Revolution had made possible.[9]

In our own time, the problem takes the form of a strange paradox: While we "know" more and more about many details of the American past due to the labors of many battalions of specialized professional historians, we actually *know* less because we lack a grasp of the overarching meaning of our history, the kind of meaning that helps shape the way we live together.

We lack an adequate perspective on our history, a perspective that allows us to see the great achievements of American history in their proper light and properly weighed against that history's admitted failings and shortcomings. We lack a shared sense of how exceptional our pioneering experiment in self-rule has been and how full of darkness and despair and want and iniquity most of human history has been by comparison. A sense of what a brilliant light came into the world with the events of 1776, when for the first time in history a nation explicitly committed itself to the essential equality of all human beings.

An Exceptional Moment

All men may be created equal, as the Declaration of Independence declares, but not all moments are remembered equally. The academic studies of social and cultural historians notwithstanding, our national memory generally does not focus on the vast stretches of ordinary time during which life goes on normally, during which men and women fall in love, have families, raise their children, bury their dead, and carry on with the many small acts of heroism, sacrifice, and devotion that mark the conduct of everyday life—the "unhistoric acts," as George Eliot wrote in the closing words of her great novel *Middlemarch*, of those "who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."[10]

No, what most people call history is more likely to concern itself with outbursts of the extraordinary, with those events and persons that invade the flow of ordinary time and alter the direction of its currents. The lodestars of popular remembrance emerge during periods and places in which the steady stream of the everyday is interrupted by a concentrated surge of fresh intellectual energy and creative force, and thoughts, discussions, debates, and institutions converge in ways that not only change the way we think but change the world.

These nodes of concentrated activity come to life in groups of people—circles, salons, debating societies, political parties, schools and universities—and not merely in the minds and words of solitary geniuses. Thus we speak in the plural of the founders of the American nation and the framers of the American Constitution. There were singular geniuses in those groups, to be sure. But it's important to stand back and think of the group as a whole, a group that embodies a wider circle of discourse that was capable of sustaining remarkably wise insights into the nature of political society, without which the events and institutions we celebrate as Americans would likely never have come to pass.

Although we often speak of the founders as if they were all of the same mind, it is also important to remember that was definitely not the case. You could drive a truck through the differences between Alexander Hamilton and Jefferson and their wildly divergent visions of the American future. And they were not the only ones to quarrel about the future. A great deal of conflict, debate, jostling, and other forms of vigorous intellectual interchange were an important element in the emergence of the constitutional arrangements that carried the American nation forward into a successful independent existence. Nobody got exactly what he wanted. Yet that state of contention, far from being regrettable, has ultimately been all to our good, since it modeled the kind of political order the Constitution would seek to establish, one built on the recognition of conflict as an inevitable part of all human affairs.

But what kind of conflict? That is an interesting question. To begin answering it, let's consider the titles of three highly interesting and well-regarded recent books on the founding period: *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, by Joseph J. Ellis, winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize; *Founding Partisans: Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, Adams, and the Brawling Birth of American Politics*, by H. W. Brands; and *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*, by Gordon S. Wood, arguably the dean of living historians of the United States.

Do you notice the unifying theme here? These founding brothers, they were also quarreling brothers, even brawling brothers. If they were friends, they also were friends often divided. And the political was often the personal. Ellis even argues in his book that the constitutional system of checks and balances was not only a political theory but a practical measure grounded in the experience of disputatious leaders and regions with quite different visions and values. In this view, the Constitution served partly to codify in law the way these quarreling brothers dealt with their disputes.

So what held it all together and made it possible for the nation to run the gauntlet of challenges to the emergence of a free and independent America? What did these figures all have in common? The ground they shared was their awareness of what a great task history had set before them. They knew that a distinct American people now existed, that it was up to them to devise a political regime suitable to govern such a people, and that their actions would to a large extent determine what kind of future lay ahead for this great experiment.

That understanding was a source of energy but also responsibility. And it was a source of joy. Writing on July 3, 1776, John Adams predicted to his wife, Abigail, that the day of independence

> will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America.—I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by

> solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.[11]

Adams erred only in expecting that July 2 would be the appointed day. He continued,

> You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not.—I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States.—Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means.[12]

After a war had been fought and a new Constitution drafted, Hamilton amplified the theme, arguing in the heat of the debates over ratification of the new Constitution in 1787 that

> it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country . . . to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable . . . of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.[13]

He concluded,

> If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.[14]

A few years later, George Washington, the greatest hero of the Revolution and the one man to whom all quarreling factions were willing to bow their heads, took the oath of office as president of the national government on a second-floor balcony of Federal Hall in New York City, where an assembled crowd could witness the historic event. Speaking minutes later before a joint session of the new Congress, he declared that "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are . . . staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."[15]

The founders knew they were creating something new, something of the utmost importance, as leaders of citizens, not subjects. They were committed to the creation of a regime that protected the rights and liberties of these self-governing citizens. They also understood the fragility of such arrangements—of all republics throughout recorded history—and understood that anything meriting the label of "experiment" was bound to be a perilous thing, a voyage into uncharted waters, as likely to fail as to succeed.

A Great River of Oratory

Here, then, is another way to think about the 250th anniversary. Let us go back to the beginnings of this foundational voyage, with the document we celebrate every July Fourth—the Declaration of Independence—and its chief author, Thomas Jefferson.

And here a bit of a surprise awaits us. Jefferson's intellectual brilliance was widely known, and he was not a particularly modest man. After all, how many of us design our own tombstones and write our own inscriptions? But in a famous 1825 letter to Henry Lee, he insisted on taking a modest approach to his role as the principal author of the document that has come to stand for the heart and soul of the American Revolution.

It is the best account we have of Jefferson's considered view of the matter, offered in his old age, in the year before his death. The object of the Declaration, he said, was "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject." It was "neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing." Instead, the Declaration "was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion."[16]

Jefferson's account tells us something important about the diffuse and mingled elements coursing through the words of this great document—and the nation it helped create. There were a great many voices in the air at the time of its creation. To understand the Declaration better, and to understand the various sources of its strength and enduring appeal, we will benefit from a little disentangling so we can better discern some of the distinct voices.

First of all, we should acknowledge that Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment, and the Declaration is in many ways a document of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, the natural rights of all human beings, and the consent of the governed as the basis for a free and legitimate government. Think, too, of the Declaration's service as an important inspiration to the French Revolution 13 years later and to similar sociopolitical movements elsewhere, even unto the present day.

So it was an Enlightenment document, but it was not *only* an Enlightenment document. There were many pre-Enlightenment elements in it, background assumptions that have to be taken into account if it is to be fully understood and its authority credited. For example, it drew on the cultural muscle memory of a century and a half of colonial American self-government, which in turn drew on a long tradition of English legal and constitutional practices. This element is what figures most prominently in the list of grievances that forms the bulk of the Declaration. Nearly all of them had to do with the deprivation of *customary* self-rule and the violation of *inherited* rights that were due to the colonists as Englishmen. To put it bluntly, they were used to ruling themselves, as they had done for 150 years or more.

Such appeals differ fundamentally from an appeal to the idea of unalienable natural rights—that is, rights we have merely by virtue of being human—because these former sets of rights are established by precedent, by custom, and are claimed as an inheritance from forebears. In the Declaration's long list of grievances against the British rulers, the king is accused of weakening and dissolving representative bodies, inhibiting the exercise of judiciary powers, imposing unelected and unaccountable imperial officials, quartering standing armies, rendering troops unaccountable to law, and so on.

Such language didn't invoke natural rights but instead referred to specific inherited rights, traceable back through the early modern legal thought of Edward Coke and John Fortescue to the Magna Carta itself, even further back to a shadowy Anglo-Saxon constitution, and then forward through the political struggles of the 17th century, all the way to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which finally established Parliament's supremacy over the monarchy. Needless to say, the distinction between the two understandings of rights is clearer in definition than in actual practice. Jefferson himself believed the Anglo-Saxon constitution was the "rightful root" of the English constitution even as he believed Americans could appeal to their *natural* rights in declaring independence.[17]

But the larger point here is that an idea of the ancient constitution, and of a historical and traditional transmission and elaboration of its liberties through many centuries of British history, is a part of the story. It forms a vivid and powerful reference point in the background of 18th-century Anglo-American thought. To repeat, the colonists were used to ruling themselves, because they thought of themselves as Englishmen with the customary inherited rights of Englishmen. The Declaration appealed to that sentiment.

Finally, we should stress the immense influence of the colonists' religious sentiments as a background element in American revolutionary sentiment. To be sure, Jefferson does not mention this in his letter to Lee, in keeping with his well-established reputation as a skeptic and critic of religious orthodoxy. But it is highly significant that, as noted above, Jefferson and Franklin both urged that the Great Seal of the United States should depict the Exodus, the Bible's great foundational story of the Jewish people, in which the Israelites escaped their captivity as slaves in Egypt with a dramatic parting of the waters of the Red Sea and came into freedom in the land God had promised them. Franklin described his idea for the seal's design in this way:

> Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharoah who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity.
>
> Motto, *Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God*.[18]

Nor was this profoundly religious symbolism offered as a form of pandering, throwing a bit of religion into the mix for the uneducated rubes. Jefferson liked the motto so much he used it on his own personal seal.[19]

The story of the Exodus is not merely a story for the Jewish people. You see it wherever you look in American history. The New England Puritans viewed their perilous ocean crossing in search of religious liberty as a repetition of the Israelites' flight to freedom, bringing them into Zion. The Latter-day Saints who made the trek to the Salt Lake Valley under the leadership of Brigham Young, seeking relief from the relentless persecution to which they had been subjected, saw themselves in a similar light. Enslaved Africans and African Americans south of the Ohio River also looked to the Exodus story as an anticipatory symbol of their own eventual freedom as they sang, "Go down, Moses. . . . Tell old Pharaoh / Let my people go." Jefferson saw the Exodus as an image of the Enlightenment, "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self government."[20]

And for all of Jefferson's reputation as a religious skeptic, he penned no more searing words than these in his 1785 book, *Notes on the State of*

Virginia, which are inscribed on the northeast portico of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC:

> Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever.[21]

But religion's influence on the revolutionary cause went much, much deeper than the ideas of elite leaders such as Jefferson and Franklin. Eighteenth-century British North American religious life was dominated by Reformed Protestantism, expressed vividly in revolutionary-era sermons, public documents, newspaper editorials, and political pamphlets. In such communities, there was a pervasive belief in the doctrine of original sin, which led to a deep suspicion of any form of concentrated power and opposition to imperial intrusions on American life—particularly when coming from a mother country whose culture was seen as arrogant and corrupt.

Britain's corruption became fodder for countless sermons. These powerful, evangelistic sermons were a major contributor to not only the rising sense of American national self-consciousness but especially the rising revolutionary sentiment of the 1770s, when it is estimated that as many as 80 percent of political pamphlets were reprinted sermons.[22] Clearly the connection between religious sentiments and political activity was strong.

Adams was no stranger to questions of political theory, and his 1776 *Thoughts on Government* became a guide to the drafting of state constitutions. But Adams understood that a growing undercurrent of popular disaffection was a far more potent cause of the Revolution than any particular philosophical question. As he wrote in his own retrospective of the struggle for independence in 1818:

> The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People. A Change in their Religious Sentiments of their Duties and Obligations. While the King, and all in Authority under him, were believed to govern, in Justice and Mercy according to the Laws and Constitutions derived to them from the God of Nature, and transmitted to them by their Ancestors—they thought themselves bound to pray for the King and Queen and all the Royal Family, and all the Authority under them, as Ministers ordained of God for their good. But when they Saw those Powers renouncing all the Principles of Authority, and bent up on the destruction of all the Securities of their Lives, Liberties and Properties, they thought it their Duty to pray for the Continental Congress and all the thirteen State Congresses, &c.[23]

In other words, rebellion to tyrants was obedience to God.

So the Declaration should be understood as a great river of oratory that was fed by different streams, a document that held together a variety of perspectives thanks to the literary skill of its principal author, Jefferson, and by the needs of the moment in which it appeared. Its enduring appeal, as it approaches its 250th anniversary, is nothing short of remarkable.

Anniversaries Past and Present

This brings us to a final way of thinking about our great national anniversary, and that is to reflect on the ways we have thought about it in the past. It has not always been the same.

The 50th anniversary of the American Revolution was an astonishing moment because it was marked by the near-simultaneous deaths of Jefferson and Adams. The fact that two of the nation's most distinguished founders, the second and third presidents, died on July 4, 1826, exactly five decades after the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of

Independence, was widely seen as a symbolic end to the revolutionary generation, prompting both pride and apprehension about the future prospects for the nation's founding principles. Was God telling America something about the fate of its Revolution? If so, what? Approving or disapproving? Either was possible.

Twenty-six years later, Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" combined high praise for the founders, the Declaration, and the Constitution with scalding criticism of the country's failure to live up to these revolutionary principles.[24] It was a profound commentary on the gap between our ideals and our actions and a harbinger of the civil war that was coming. But it was also a strong endorsement of the document to which the nation would have to return to reorder itself and find its way anew.

The nation's 100th anniversary, in 1876, the first major observance since the end of the Civil War, was marked by a proclamation from President Ulysses S. Grant suffused with religious overtones, emphasizing thanksgiving to God and prayers for His continued favor.[25]

And then there was President Calvin Coolidge's speech commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Revolution, in July 1926.[26] It was a defense of America's founding principles against progressives like Woodrow Wilson, who believed the massive social and economic changes in American life in the early 20th century had invalidated those principles and required modern theories of government to take their place. It was a speech that stands in the line of great presidential rhetoric from Washington to Jefferson, to Lincoln, to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to Ronald Reagan. Coolidge reminded Americans then and now of the exceptional character of their own revolution and the enduring importance of liberty and equality as natural rights:

> About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful. It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance over the

> people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction can not lay claim to progress. They are reactionary. Their ideas are not more modern, but more ancient, than those of the Revolutionary fathers.[27]

These are words that Americans today, almost a century later, living in the second quarter of the 21st century, may be ready to hear afresh. Perhaps the way forward begins by looking backward.

Many of us feel obliged to look back at 1776 in as critical and dry-eyed a manner as possible, in a manner that not only takes full and honest account of the founders' moral and intellectual failings but places those failings before all else when reflecting on our past. I think there is much about this disposition that speaks well of us. We are not afraid to be self-critical and to carry out our self-criticism in public, in the full view of the world. Our chief rivals, and even some of our allies, believe otherwise. They believe this openness weakens them. We believe the opposite is true.

But self-criticism can easily go too far and lead us into cynicism. Its excesses are as dangerous as those of self-congratulation. A mature perspective on our past demands more of us than that. It demands that we seek a balance, with a full awareness of the fact that in the real world, ideals are often ignored and heroes are always going to be flawed. Yet we do ourselves and the rising generations of our young people no favors if we deny the greatness of what our country has achieved and its potential to achieve much more in the years ahead. We should affirm that greatness, not least for the sake of those who are coming of age today and looking for fields of endeavor that will prove fulfilling and admirable.

The Formation of Republican Souls

And here I come to that “not our job” aspect of education that we ignore at our peril. Of course, history must be based on truth, not on pleasing or manipulative fictions. We do ourselves and our young no favors by prettifying or oversimplifying the past and failing to give an honest account of our failures as well as our triumphs.

But we also do no favors to ourselves or the truth if we fail to honor the magnificent achievements of our history and leave them out of our accounting, as has become too often the case. We need to remember that one of the civic functions of history, one of the chief reasons we endeavor to record the past and teach it to our young, is to serve as a vessel of shared memory, imparting to each generation a sense of membership in its own society, a sense of living connection to its own past—a sense that can unite us and sustain us in hard times.

Lincoln brought that sense of historical connection to many of his best speeches, most notably to his great speech at the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg on November 19, 1863. Even as the war raged around him, he reached back to the nation’s birth in 1776 as one of the great achievements in human history, a precious legacy to whose preservation the deeds of the present ought to be dedicated.[28] He found in the American past a source of sustenance, a steadying influence in a time buffeted by chaos and fear, a source of renewed courage and determination.

And so can it be for us. Our young people deserve nothing less. We are failing them and our country so long as we fail to give them a rich and sustaining sense of their own past, a sense that is both truthful and inspiring. It’s high time we did. For consider the alternative: If a great story of estimable things can give us courage and hope in a hard time, does it not stand to reason that the promulgation of a dishonorable story of relentless failure, mendacity, and despoliation can have the opposite effect?

For the inglorious story, too, is a kind of civic education. We are tenderly solicitous of the "safety" of college students who may be exposed to ideas or words they may find upsetting. But why do we not think about the effects of the inglorious story they are taking in? Doesn't their picture of the world they inhabit profoundly affect their sense of their life's possibilities and prospects? Shouldn't we consider whether the remarkably high indicators of unhappiness among our young people—and not only young people—are traceable partly to a massive loss of morale and hope?[29]

I'm concerned about these statistics, as any sensible person should be. It is hard not to think they presage a kind of general moral collapse in our society. No one would deny there are material factors behind them, such as the dizzying changes in the structures of the national and world economy. But a nation's morale is ultimately a question of spirit more than matter.

One cannot deny that by moving into the vacuum left by the absence of a genuine civic education, the decline of religion, and the decay of traditional structures of family life, the inglorious story has been gaining the upper hand on us, playing a powerful role in sustaining our low morale; saturating our young in debilitating ideas about the past, present, and future; and leaving them isolated and anxious. Many of my students tell me, without irony, that they believe the present day is the worst time in all human history. Imagine what will become of them when we experience really tough times, as we are sure to do, and perhaps sooner than we think.

As the great Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl observed, we humans can bear almost any kind of material deprivation and suffering—except the deprivation of meaning. "He who has a *why* to live for," Frankl wrote, "can bear with almost any *how*."[30] And without that *why*, almost any *how* can defeat us and overturn our best intentions and hopes. Such matters go far deeper than civics. But it is not too much to claim that a robust civic education, which seeks to impart a sense of continuity with generations gone before and begins the process of locating one's life in a meaning far larger than oneself, is an important step back from the lonely precipice on whose brink we find ourselves. We don't have a moment to lose in getting started.

What about the all-too-human leaders who brought our nation into being? We can teach our children this: Flawed people are normal. But what is not normal or usual are those rare moments in history when flawed people come together to produce great things. Not flawless things, but great things, worthy of our admiration and gratitude. The collection of remarkable men and women present at our beginning, at that remarkable juncture of human history 250 years ago—each of them contributed something to the outcome. Even as they quarreled.

We've never stopped quarreling. You may have noticed that we are still quarreling today. And yet we have held together. Perhaps for the 250th, we should give thanks for that fact and at least take time out from our quarrels long enough to lift a toast to those who helped make our tradition of quarreling possible. And to one another, whose job it is to carry on.

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