

Country of the Future
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July 6, 2008

Independence Day. Each year on the fourth of July we Americans celebrate the anniversary of our declaration of independence from Britain.

But this holiday is more than commemoration of a merely political separation. It's a celebration of the great principles the founders of America asserted to support their declaration. It's a celebration of the right of the people to govern themselves.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

On Friday, in this place, 450 people listened to these words, to the Declaration in its entirety, and to the Bill of Rights. Many children came up to add their own signatures below John Hancock's on the large replica of the Declaration—along with quite a few adults. Our Independence Celebration gave me a chance to speak with many people about the meaning they find in the fourth of July. One woman, rich in years and steadying herself with a cane, came forward and up these narrow steps to sign her name. She called it an act of faith.

We need faith these days. We can look around and see that our country faces many problems that we need to solve. From health care to education to the price of gasoline to a war that has taken its toll of blood and treasure, we face many difficulties.

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, who pledged his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor in support of its principles, also lived in a difficult time.

Imagine: when the Declaration of Independence was written, the Constitution didn't yet exist. To assert its principles—to create a new country—was certainly an act of faith. And faith was essential, because things did not go so well.

The first thing that happened was war. The American Revolution. Jefferson said later, when he was President, “I have seen enough of one war never to wish to see another.” The war that won their freedom did not bring them happiness. America's first attempt at self-government was a weak and ineffective Confederation. After all the brave words, after all the courageous struggle, the country was in disarray.

Jefferson must have wondered: Would the great experiment in “the consent of the governed” falter and fail? But Jefferson had faith. To meet the continuing difficulty of his time he returned

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to basic principles: “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves.”

For eight years, he worked tirelessly in the Virginia legislature to enact the nation’s first law guaranteeing religious liberty. The idea that people should be free to speak their religious views and freely exercise their religious practices was a template for what later became the first amendment guarantee of freedom of religion. The most controversial part of the religious tolerance law, the part that made its passage so controversial, was the rule that anyone, regardless of religious belief, could hold a government position—that there should be no religious litmus test for political office. Jefferson was viciously attacked for advocating this idea. Many of his contemporaries were offended by the notion that a non-Christian might serve as a member of the Virginia Legislature.

But this element of Virginia’s groundbreaking law soon found widespread acceptance and it became a central tenet of the US Constitution—not just the Bill of Rights—it’s central to the Constitution itself, that there is no religious test for holding political office.

Ah, the Constitution. In 1787 Congress called for a convention of delegates to “revise” the Articles of Confederation. It quickly became a Constitutional Convention. Jefferson wasn’t there; he was America’s ambassador to France. He worried from a distance that the document underway in Philadelphia might not contain enough protections for individual liberty. But Jefferson was a man who during his life wrote letters: 16,000 letters (that we know about). He kept his old friend Benjamin Franklin well-advised of his views, and his fellow Virginian Edmund Randolph submitted 15 principles for the new Constitution: the idea that the power of the executive should be divided among three branches of government; the idea of religious tolerance; these were in what was called the “Virginia Plan.”

In many ways the Constitution that was ratified in 1789 reflects Jefferson’s influence, and the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments ratified just a few years later, contain the fundamental principles of individual liberty that protect us today. Government by the consent of the governed; power resting in the hands of the people.

Jefferson never lost his faith in “the people.” There were moments, though, that gave him pause—his two terms as President, from 1801-1809, seemed to have required not only faith in the people but all of his patience. There were many challenges.

Jefferson worried about the future of the country. In the evolving power of large companies, he saw an “aristocracy” of “monied corporations” that, he said “challenge our government to a trial by strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country.” He deplored the militancy of nationalism, saying, “I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power the greater it will be. He did his best to forestall the War of 1812, saying, “It is incumbent on every generation to pay its own debts as it goes, a principle which if acted on would save one-half the wars of the world.”

While President Jefferson worried, as events tested his faith in government by the people, Ralph Waldo Emerson was born and, not incidentally, this Meeting House was founded. Emerson was of a generation that **knew** Jefferson and the other framers of American democracy. And it was

Emerson and his contemporaries, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, who brought a new understanding to Jeffersonian principles.

Jefferson helped to create a government that was **not** limited to people of homogeneous religious belief. In its guarantees of liberty, its rejection of monarchy, and its commitment to tolerance, the framework of what we call the United States of America was like no other country on earth. Jefferson hoped and believed in those principles; but Emerson, who was of a new generation, could see in the world around him the fruits of those principles. He could see the effects of the freedoms to which the framers of the Constitution had given their faith.

Emerson could look around and see the way that America's founding principles attracted "a heterogeneous population crowding on ships from all corners of the world...contributing their private thought to public opinion." He saw that the influence of this diversity was that America's laws would become cosmopolitan, tolerant, humane. From the perspective of 75 years after the Declaration of Independence, Emerson called America "the country of the future...a country of beginnings, of projects, of designs, and expectations.

Our nation has survived many challenges. Its faith in its principles has been tested in every generation. But each generation, in its turn, has reaffirmed government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

When we of this generation place the Declaration of Independence on display and invite signatures, it is no wonder that young and old alike step forward to reaffirm our faith. Because it is not the principles alone that make America the country of the future. Our nation is not perfect. The principles of liberty do not guarantee perfection; they do require faith.

The principles of American democracy promise us only the chance to decide for ourselves what our country will be. Events of the day may test our faith; so be it. If we have faith, then we will do the work. And if we do the work, future generations will have faith, and they will do the work. And one day—one day—this nation will be what its dreamers dreamed.

Let us, too, pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.