

Of, By, and For the People

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – July 7, 2013

When Americans celebrate Independence Day on July 4th, we commemorate the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. In reality, the declaration wasn't the spark that lit the fuse of the American Revolution; the first shots were fired in Concord and Lexington more than a year before. The declaration also didn't mark the birth of a new nation, as we know it, for the United States Constitution wouldn't be adopted for another 11 years.

Yet July 4th is when we celebrate. And, the Declaration of Independence is the text we look to as the definitive expression of our collective selves.

It's popular, these days, to invoke the titles and the texts of both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. People are rereading both documents and encouraging others to do the same. That's a good thing.

But, the language, emotions, and concepts people emphasize reveal differing interpretations of even the most historic events. Like most defining moments in human progress, the American Revolution was both an act of destruction and an act of creation.

By declaring the American Colonies free states independent from the British Empire, the signers of the declaration presumed to destroy an existing system of government. And, yet, the Declaration of Independence was also an act of creation, with its stated intent to institute a new system of government securing the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The majority view in our time seems focused on the destructive nature of revolution. As a blow against tyranny, the revolt of the American Colonies against the British Empire resonates deeply with an American public feeling increasingly cut off from and unheeded by their federal government in Washington. That's why we see references to quotes like that of Thomas Jefferson declaring: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

Conservatives distrustful of big government find solace in the US Constitution as a framework to reign in and halt excesses of government. A friend shared a quote this week from Justice William O. Douglas: "The Constitution is not neutral. It was designed to take the government off the backs of people."

I understand these views. And, the concerns are rooted in real problems of today.

But, I have a fundamental difference of perspective which affects my view of where we go from here. As much as I admire the courage of patriots who signed that Declaration

of Independence and fought to overthrow an unjust government, I am also inspired by the creative aspects of what the Founding Fathers accomplished.

I take my view from that expressed by President Lincoln at Gettysburg. For me, “government of the people, by the people, for the people” defines who we are. Or, at least who we set out to be – in a unique and inspiring vision of a people living together in peace and unity. “A new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” is the genius I celebrate as our true independence.

I have a hard time seeing the Declaration of Independence as only a big government smack down. I struggle with an “us-versus-them” mentality, suggesting the Constitution exists solely to protect the people from the government.

In an age when most peoples were ruled by monarchs handing down laws by birthright, our Founding Fathers put into action the revolutionary notion we each have the same birthrights and the authority to join in creating a government whose power rests with “the consent of the governed.” It’s not consent by the people to the government; it’s mutual consent between each of us, declaring how we will live together in peace.

Maybe it’s just me, but the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution require more of me than consent. It demands my active involvement and participation. The colonists had no means of redress with British Parliament – being denied representation. From 1787 to today, citizens of the United States have the power of the vote to determine who makes laws affecting us and the right to seek legislative and executive office ourselves at every level of government.

The walls between the people and our government today are not imaginary. But, they are also not solely of someone else’s making. From local to national levels, government of the people, by the people, for the people requires personal involvement.

As Pogo said, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

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