

“A Day to Celebrate the American Promise”  
by the editors of the *National Review*

July 4, 1776, is the birthdate of the United States of America. Now, more than ever, it should be celebrated for that, but also as something more: the greatest single day for human liberty in the history of the world.

The birthdate of the United States, long settled, is contested today by radicals: Should we celebrate it, or mourn it? Should we instead center the founding of our nation in its worst moments, not its best? Of course, America was conceived, was born, and matured in stages. The history of the American people dated to Jamestown in 1607, and our self-government to the first Virginia House of Burgesses in 1619 and the Mayflower Compact in 1620. Our separation from Britain began at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, and was not completed until November 25, 1783, when the British evacuated occupied Manhattan. The full promise of America was longer in the achieving, and is never an entirely completed project.

But consider that phrase: “the promise of America.” No other nation, before July 4, 1776, was founded on a promise. No other polity could be called to fulfill its founding ideals, because no other polity had any.

In drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson and his collaborators John Adams and Benjamin Franklin made a dramatic choice: not only to provide the Continental Congress with an announcement of a new nation’s birth, but also to offer a justification for that founding. Then, they went further: They grounded that justification in the universal and equal rights of man. The second paragraph of the Declaration, in words mostly Jefferson’s but bearing the signature of all 13 states assembled in the Continental Congress, announced to the world:

*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,*

---

“All” men. “Any” form of government. These are universal truths, and calling them “self-evident” was a bold challenge to a world in which they were rarely honored. In the world of 1776, few people chose any of their own government, or had enforceable liberties against a limited government. In the words of Seymour Drescher (one of the leading historians of global slavery and abolition), “personal bondage was the prevailing form of labor in most of the world. Personal freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution. In 1772, Arthur Young estimated that only 33 million of the world’s 775 million inhabitants could be called free. Adam Smith offered a similarly somber ratio to his students and prophesied that slavery was unlikely to disappear for ages, if ever.”

The Declaration, by marrying eloquent words to political deeds, created a language in which people of every nation, rank, and color could champion liberty and challenge tyranny and bondage. And so they did, here and abroad, almost from the first moment they heard the words. By the end of the 18th century, the Declaration had inspired reformers and revolutionaries in France, the Netherlands, and Haiti. Vermont in 1777 became the first place on earth to ban slavery in its constitution; Pennsylvania in 1780 became the first to ban it by legislation. From the outset, the new United States was unlike any nation that had ever existed. From the very beginning, the citizens of the new nation set about the business of fulfilling the Declaration’s promise, in myriad ways that are still contested today. Their descendants would expend much blood and treasure securing liberty at home and promoting it abroad.

The Founding Fathers were not utopians. The men who signed the Declaration were committing treason, and they knew they could be hanged for it. George Washington had it read aloud to his troops, who knew the same thing. They did so for no light or transient causes, but for the greatest and most enduring purposes. They made the greatest nation the world has ever known, and made possible much of the progress in others as well. They deserve the fireworks of our Independence Day.