

Forum: On Lincoln's birthday, his definition of American identity

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Feb 11, 2015 at 9:30 PM

Updated Feb 11, 2015 at 9:36 PM

Human business is messy business: emotional, conflictual, volatile, and even violent.

That's the reality; the daily news is evidence enough.

If you think the nation is a mess, recall 1863 when it was being torn asunder by a civil war. Rancor, hate, and violence ran rampant. Families were rent in two — son against father, brother against brother — and decimated by deaths and casualties. American killing fields prefigured the horrors of wars to come.

Lincoln was engaged in this very messy business, saving the Union. The nation now honors him on his birthday. But when alive he was savaged by editors, political opponents and cartoonists. Yet through it all he became an exemplar of leadership.

More importantly, Lincoln provided us with the most precise and succinct narrative of what it means to be an American. National unity requires a common guiding narrative, the story that tells us who we are and what we are striving for. His Gettysburg Address has become our American Creed.

Who can't recall his opening lines? "Four score and seven years ago" Unfortunately, the rest tends to get garbled in our memory, forgotten or never became part of one's belief system.

"Our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln had reached back to the Declaration to clarify once and for all its meaning. "All men are created equal" meant every human being without exception. And with a victorious outcome of the Civil War there would be "a new birth of freedom."

There you have it: the sacred belief that makes us American, the core of American identity. No other nation has been so conceived; and there's no other nation in the world like it. It's what we stand for and will die for. And without that common and unifying belief the centrifugal forces of multiculturalism could well rip the nation apart.

An identity forged in the belief that all men are created equal has profound and inescapable moral implications. It determines how we relate to one another. And that way defies legal description, except in the extremes.

The manner of living politely together, working together for the common good and respecting our fellow Americans can't be encoded in a straight-jacket of laws. For we are free to do none of it.

There are always those who will exploit the system, be outright obnoxious, in your face, insulting and outrageous under the banner of freedom of speech. But that's the price of living in a nation conceived in liberty.

On the other hand, every civilization if it is not to perish must have a culture of restraint. It can be exercised either externally by an iron fist or internally by personal restraint. For a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" depends upon voluntary compliance. Self-government only works if "the better angels of our nature" prevail. It's called civic virtue.

Otherwise America will fail the test of "whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure."

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of the Human Service Center. He lives in Groveland.