

In the Spotlight: A founding virtue, squelching discord for common good

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So what's this got to do with the Fourth of July?

The Declaration of Independence was not the result of Thomas Jefferson's writing and the revisions by the Continental Congress. It was the result of a very conscious and carefully self-managed group process. Without that there would have been no Declaration of Independence.

Although the Founding Fathers never had a psychology course, they understood the destructive powers of human passion far better than we. They knew that the demise of the Roman Republic came from the discord within and not from hordes bashing down their frontier doors.

They sometimes used the word faction as a synonym for discord. But that shouldn't be confused with having differences. The Romans had lots of political differences about which they were quite passionate. But they also knew that these had to be constrained to prevent the ruination of the state.

They called that restraint virtue. It was their inoculation against discord.

Some of the patriots were known "hotheads," others more calm, deliberative and calculating. A few even objected to making such a decisive step for independence. All this was compounded by significant cultural differences, historical animosities and resentments among the colonies.

There was little affection between the northern and southern colonies. George Washington privately described sentiments that were publically expressed about New Englanders: “an exceedingly dirty and nasty people.” Even the New England militias refused to accept soldiers into their ranks from neighboring colonies.

The issue of the day then was not a writing of a declaration of independence. It was about whether these colonies could ever reach agreement on separating from the most powerful nation in the world. Yet they did.

How?

They focused on the greater good, the common good: the freedom to govern themselves. Painstakingly, frustratingly and with great forbearance toward one another they strove not for a majority but a unanimous decision, which they achieved. From the last paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: “We. . .the Representatives of the United States of America. . .in the name and by the authority of the good people of these Colonies. . .declare that these United Colonies are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown. . . .”

This could never have happened without controlling their passions, subjecting their parochial interests to the interests of the whole, curtailing their tongues, and treating each other with respect even if they didn't feel like it. This was the virtue that made the Declaration of Independence. And it's the virtue that each generation must possess to keep it intact.

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