

In the Spotlight: Fourth of July is our annual wake-up call to duty

Posted Jul 4, 2011 at 12:01 AM

Updated Jul 4, 2011 at 3:06 AM

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The good news is that America has always risen to the occasion. We've been able to fix what has gone awry, albeit never perfectly. Of course, that's no future guarantee. Yet previous generations have extricated the country from whatever mess they created. Upon this historical fact our hope rests.

But the question is: How come we let the state of affairs deteriorate to a critical level before taking action?

The answer is both complicated and simple. The complicated part is that history is unpredictable. Novel situations are always emerging that require novel solutions.

The simple answer is the way Americans practice democracy. It's the root of our evils as well as our blessings. The American appetite for devouring the fruits of liberty is insatiable, self-indulgent. We neglect and abuse the tree of liberty that nourishes us. Specifically, Americans no longer know who they are and what they are about as a nation. We have become ignorant of our own history.

The result is a failure of vigilance and duty to be engaged in the life of the nation, which means working to create ways in which we can all live well together. It's the original but long-forgotten meaning of politics.

The Fourth of July is our annual wake-up call, our reminder that the nation did not materialize out of thin air but was born in blood and sweat. It's only by blood and sweat that it can be kept intact. This demands paying attention to what is going on and holding our legislators and ourselves accountable for what needs to be done. American civilization is a fragile structure. Freedom inevitably breeds conflict and abuse, since all are free to responsibly or irresponsibly pursue their interests.

The Declaration of Independence proclaims that “all men are created equal . . . with certain unalienable rights . . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted . . . deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That . . . whenever government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.”

Yes, people have the right “to alter or to abolish it.” But the Declaration further states that “it's their duty” to fix government.

Just blaming the president, Congress, governors, and legislators is nothing more than complaining. The Declaration of Independence, which we celebrate today, is our reminder that the fate of the nation is ultimately in our hands.

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