

In the Spotlight: A reminder of whom we ought to be

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That “proposition” was the most concise statement ever made - a fundamental belief - of what it means to be an American. So why didn’t the Americans of 1776 understand the Declaration of Independence the way we do today?

Simply, the colonies united first as a means of keeping Great Britain from intruding upon how they governed themselves. It had little to do with treating everyone equally. The colonists were not about to replace the king with a group from Philadelphia telling them what to do.

Lincoln knew this well. But he argued that when the Founding Fathers unanimously adopted the Declaration of Independence they had embedded in what was a “merely revolutionary document an abstract truth applicable to all men for all times.”

“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.”

This was not only a vision for America but contained within it a moral principle for governing political life. “No one has the right to rule another without their consent,” said Lincoln. And it’s why Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence as the soul of America; a soul well pursued, albeit imperfectly, during the Civil War.

The Declaration of Independence is the animating spirit and vision of how we are to live our lives together in this nation. It implies that it must be lived with mutual respect. Interests, beliefs and likes and dislikes may vary. But mutual respect is the only behavior that prevents these differences from imploding into verbal or physical hatreds, resentments and retaliations.

Mutual respect is the concrete expression of that “abstract truth applicable to all men for all times.” But given human nature the national soul is always in need of cleansing.

The recent episode of children abusing an elderly grandmother on their school bus may well signify a nation drifting from its vision. Children imitate adult leadership: political, professional, educational, sport, entertainment and parental. Have these leaders forgotten what America stands for?

The Fourth of July is a reminder of whom we ought to be as Americans. After all, no one’s life, liberty and pursuit of happiness can ever be secured without the collaboration and cooperation of our fellow citizens. And that necessitates mutual respect. Without it, the American vision becomes nothing more than a daydream.

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