

Op-Ed: Lincoln valued moral truths expressed in Declaration of Independence

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But on July 4, 1776, there was no nation. There were 13 colonies with their own governments, laws and cultures that joined together to declare themselves “Free and Independent States.” They were not going to fight for independence only to submit themselves to some new, external governmental power.

Many delegates to the Continental Congress were expressly prohibited from agreeing to anything that would interfere with the “internal affairs” of their respective colony; otherwise they could not vote for independence, never mind join in the fight for it.

Yet the principles for a free government, the foundation for a future United States and the core beliefs forming the American identity were laid down in the Declaration of Independence. It was “an expression of the American mind,” Thomas Jefferson said.

In other words, the Declaration was a statement of what Americans believed. These beliefs became the guiding and binding force, spiritually and morally, that would slowly shape the people and our nation. It was and is the American creed.

Lincoln recognized this early on in his career. He praised Jefferson’s foresight of introducing “into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times” — the abstract truth Lincoln referred to being that “all men are created

equal.”

That truth was pregnant with implications. “In all the coming days,” said Lincoln, “it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block” to those who want to oppress others. And so it has been.

But mention truth in today’s culture, and people flee to the exits as if someone shouted “Fire!” in a theater. Why? Because embedded in truth are moral imperatives.

Truth speaks to right and wrong, good and bad, oughts and ought nots. Truth compels as well as condemns certain kinds of behavior. And what infuriated slaveholders most was not Lincoln’s opposition to slavery, but that he dared to refer to it as a “moral wrong.”

For Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence was the “father of all moral principle.” It embodied not only a political order but also a moral order.

“We hold these truths ...” is what makes the Declaration of Independence truly revolutionary in the history of mankind. No other people in the world had ever claimed such beliefs as the basis for their political order.

A “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” was founded on the truth that “all men are created equal.” In Lincoln’s Euclidean terms, it was the fundamental “axiom of free government.” What followed from that axiomatic logic — which Lincoln articulated in Peoria on Oct. 16, 1854, and continually argued from that day on — was “that no man has a right to rule another without his consent.”

The response to Lincoln was typical of what we hear today. “It’s all relative.” And so it was said that the Declaration only “applied to the superior races.”

Others took the position that there were “no absolute truths.” The Declaration was nothing other than a bunch of “self-evident lies.” There were no such things as natural rights, abstract truths, but only concrete, here-and-now rights, like slavery. It was the might-makes-right philosophy that would become the political principles of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc.

It appears that Lincoln got the first bitter taste of what now goes under the name of postmodernism: All truth is an illusion because nothing can be known for certain. But that’s hardly what we celebrate on the Fourth of July.

What we celebrate are the truths upon which America was founded. What we celebrate is our commitment to honor and defend them. What we celebrate are a set of fundamental and common beliefs that bind us as a nation and form the core of our American identity.

We believe that all men are created equal; that we all share in a common humanity; that everyone has a right to life, liberty, and the freedom to live their lives according to the dictates of their conscience; that governments are instituted to protect these freedoms; that government's authority to rule comes from the consent of the people; and that when government fails in this responsibility, the people have not just a right but a duty to change it so that it truly serves the common good of the people.

Part of the American identity expressed in the Declaration of Independence includes the word "duty." Yes, we have rights, but also the duty to protect, defend, respect and secure those rights for others as well as ourselves. It's the American moral imperative.

We hardly do it perfectly, but our ongoing attempts to do so are what make us Americans. The Fourth is the nation's annual ritual that reminds us of who we are — or, at least, who we ought to be.

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