

Forum: Honor America by working for the common good

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The state's motto comes from a New Hampshire Revolutionary War hero: General John Stark. He led his troops at Bunker Hill, Trenton and the Battle of Bennington, then retired to private life. Stark was the epitome of the independent, straight-talking, common-sense Yankee.

What he actually said was, "Live free or die - death is not the worst of evils." A little too long for a license plate. Yet it would have better conveyed what was once more prized in our culture: There are causes that are worth foregoing self-interest and even worth dying for.

The Fourth of July brings us back to our cultural roots when sacrifice for the common good - patriotism - was a badge of honor and mark of character. Modern society finds this difficult to swallow. But freedom never comes free. To secure and preserve it always demands sacrifice, sometimes of life itself.

The odds were totally against the Americans. Great Britain was the most powerful nation in the world. Its population of 11 million clearly outstripped the Colonies' 2.5 million, of which one-fifth were slaves. George Washington had 5,000 troops in his Continental Army, with untrained and undisciplined state militias to assist. The British had 50,000 troops, 30,000 German mercenaries and the largest navy in the world.

All logic said that this was a losing cause. Yet this was the risk the Founding Fathers, Mothers, Sons and Daughters of 1776 took.

We tend to think there was only one Declaration of Independence. But the Colonies and communities from Maine to Georgia between April and July of 1776 created their own declarations, which were a death penalty offense. These 90 or so documents share

common themes: separate nationhood, political and legal truths, rights of the people, and the willingness to risk their “lives and fortunes” in that cause.

The Declaration of Independence was simply “an expression of the American mind,” said Jefferson. So after the Second Continental Congress unanimously adopted the resolution to become “Free and Independent States” on July 2, its members proceeded for the next two days to heavily edit Jefferson’s draft statement of the reasons for American independence.

The American people’s commitment to this cause was summed up in the final edit of the Declaration’s closing sentence on 4 July 1776: “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

It’s what John Stark meant when he said, “Live free or die - death is not the worst of evils.” Although few of us are ever called to risk our lives for the nation, we are all called to build and protect the common good in the neighborhood, town, city, state and country. And that’s a noble sacrifice too.

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