

In the Spotlight: May not only freedom ring on this Independence Day, but the necessity of virtue

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Rituals and beliefs are the two sides of the coin of identity. This is true for a person, family, community or nation. Without rituals, identity ceases to be. And without beliefs, there is no identity to cease.

A strong nation requires a belief in itself and for what it stands. Uncertainty brews peril on the home front. But it also needs rituals to remind itself, energize itself and correct itself lest it forget and become aimless of heart, mind and spirit and weak of will.

The Fourth of July is that American ritual and we should celebrate it with gusto. But here's the thing: The Declaration of Independence is more than a statement of our shared political beliefs. It's a set of moral principles by which we order and govern ourselves so that we may live well together.

What's not stated yet implied is the necessity of the virtue of self-restraint. Moral principles are meaningless without ongoing effort to put them into practice. And that takes virtue. Otherwise the Declaration of Independence would be nothing more than a daydream. This was exactly what King George III and his loyalists thought.

Few have ever taken time to read the entire Declaration. But the basic concepts of the first three sentences of the second paragraph seem to be embedded in the American psyche:

1. A belief "that all men are created equal ... endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights," among them being "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."
2. Government exists "to secure these rights," deriving its authority "from the consent of the governed."
3. Whenever government fails its purpose, "it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and institute new government ... most likely to produce their safety and happiness."

The Declaration also reminds us of our “duty” as citizens. Whenever government becomes abusive, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.” In other words, we are all on the hook to ensure good government.

No people in the history of humanity had ever set forth such principles of government. President Woodrow Wilson defined America as “an idea, an ideal and as a vision.” He knew well from the Book of Proverbs that “where there is no vision the people perish.”

But he also knew that unless there was a willingness among the many to sink some self-interest for a greater good the American vision would become quite hollow. The Romans called this civic virtue. It was — for a time — the cornerstone of their republic.

The central truth is that only virtue can buy a stable, effective and honest government. And a government of the people, by the people and for the people means that civic virtue must be an integral part of our culture.

Today we reflect upon that American vision and celebrate our achievements. But let’s also remember that unless there is a virtuous check on our primal instincts, infinite self-interests and propensity to discord, the great American experiment of self-rule will fail.

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