

Op-Ed: ‘All men are created equal’ a story still being written

By John F. Gilligan, Ph.D.

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The United States of America is the only nation in the history of humanity that was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” That in a nutshell is how Abraham Lincoln defined our national identity in his Gettysburg Address.

It’s what we stand for, strive for and die for. It’s what makes us Americans; it’s our soul. Anything less makes us less and dishonors the lives given that this this nation may live. No society in the world had ever been so envisioned and formed.

Writing about the self-evident truths in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln praised Jefferson for introducing “into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth applicable to all men and all times....” The nation was not born that day but its founding principles had been set forth. They would govern the course of American history and serve as its moral correcting force.

How well we honor, safeguard and promote our national inheritance — “that all men are created equal” — is an ongoing task. But unless we know what it is, identity confusion ensues. And the nation knows not where it goes.

Declaring independence was one thing but achieving it another. The unspoken yet haunting question was: How would the Declaration’s principles be implemented once the dog caught the wheel of independence? For there could be no nation without a system of government to secure the inalienable rights of the people.

By defeating the British, the colonies did become “Free and Independent States.” Yet there was no national government; instead, a confederation of states, their relationship to one another like the European Union of today. The governor of Virginia in 1787 called it an “association of republics.”

By the end of the Revolutionary War, a crisis was brewing. Some states refused to pay their war debts, including payments to the Continental Army. Seven states had created their own, worthless paper currencies. The Confederation was rapidly degenerating into

narrow pursuits of self-interest and mutual conflicts. A solution was needed before America became the prey of international vultures.

This brings us to another critical date in the forging of our nation: 17 September 1787. It's seldom remembered or celebrated. In the same room where the Declaration of Independence was unanimously approved sat George Washington — the people's most trusted man — presiding at the Constitutional Convention. From here a novel form of government was sent not to the state legislatures but to the American people for their ratification. It was called the United States Constitution. No government since man first walked the Earth had ever been so structured.

The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution mark the two sides of the coin of the American Revolution. One side stamped 4 July 1776 and the other 17 September 1787. And the binding artisan behind it all was George Washington.

The celebration of the Fourth of July is a ritual that stands for a nation forged over decades. From once being loyal British subjects of a king, Americans became fellow citizens equal to one another. And from a government once ruled by divisive states, we became “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

It's an extraordinary story, one to be known, remembered and told. But it's an unending story. Each generation writes its own chapter. For the abstract truth “that all men are created equal” still applies and for all time.

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