

In the Spotlight: Remember today what ‘We the People’ are capable of

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In the end, it’s Americans who make - or break - the nation. The Founding Fathers spoke of the necessity of virtue within the citizenry if the Republic were to survive. By this they meant self-discipline, temperance, self-improvement, working together (concord) and a willingness to forego personal interests for the common good. It was called civic virtue, a moribund concept in today’s culture.

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The Founders knew that men were not angels and that government and laws were necessary. But they also knew that government and laws had to be underpinned by a modicum of citizen self-restraint, civility, service to community and rational discourse - i.e., virtue.

Benjamin Franklin captured this reality when asked at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention: “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or monarchy?” Without missing a beat, Franklin quipped: “A republic, if you can keep it.”

In other words, the Republic is ultimately in our own hands. It has always been so. Indeed, the rights of life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, etc., can only be secured to the extent that the people and their government actually respect and honor them in others. Otherwise everything implodes.

When government fails in this duty, the Declaration of Independence minces no words: The people not only have a “right” but a “duty” to “throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.” This is what’s called government of the

people, by the people and for the people.

The folks of 1776 had a good handle on human nature. They knew the follies of men, that unless they stood guard over their elected representatives things could quickly go awry. And when the American people become sleepy, they do go awry. Our state of Illinois is example enough.

Our nation has come a long way since 1776, and we have every right to celebrate its achievements. But nothing happened magically.

America was made by the people through hard work, invention, risk and entrepreneurship. Major reforms to fulfill the ideals of the Declaration - the abolition of slavery; labor, women's and civil rights; accommodations for the disabled, etc. - were likewise initiated by the people, not presidents, governors or the Supreme Court.

We the people serve as a corrective force when the truths and ideals of the Declaration of Independence are forgotten and tarnished. We the people have built as well as transformed America. And it's our right, responsibility, duty and ongoing task to keep it whole.

These are some of the things worth pondering as we watch the red, white and blue light up the skies this Fourth of July.

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