

Gilligan: Fourth of July, 2017

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Jul 1, 2017 at 6:59 PM

Discord had broken the nation in 1861. Would slavery end or be extended? “If slavery is not wrong,” said Lincoln, “nothing is wrong.”

In the years leading to his presidency, he had argued that moral principle must guide the formation of public policy and law. If raw sociopolitical interests prevailed, the nation would implode.

Do such interests prevail today?

The Declaration of Independence had established a nobler vision. At Gettysburg, Lincoln stated its essence: “a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” But slave owners claimed that the nation’s Founders never intended African Americans to be included in the Declaration.

Lincoln had heard this long before he became president. In fact, he had dropped out of politics before the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in May 1854. This law opened the door for new slave states in the West. And it brought Lincoln back into the political fray with his Peoria speech.

What’s remarkable about that speech, 16 October 1854, is that it laid out the political philosophy that governed his career. It was rooted in the Declaration of Independence. “No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent.” He believed that slavery was “a moral, social, and political evil.” It was the epitome of blind self-interest. Blind self-interest was replacing the Declaration and fast becoming a “new principle of government.”

The 1860 speech that sealed Lincoln’s presidential nomination was given at Cooper Union in New York City. It included scholarly historical evidence that the nation’s Founders intended every word of the Declaration. They believed that slavery would die a natural death.

But that didn’t happen. What Lincoln feared, had.

The principle of self-interest had seized the reins of government. It inevitably led to discord that had severed the nation from its founding moral principles. And we are currently at that edge.

The “self-evident truth” that “all men are created equal” is being jettisoned for the free expression of venomous hatred. And that’s the nuclear fuel of discord.

Discord is a sociopolitical Ebola. It has infected our political institutions from Washington to Springfield. It rages on college campuses. And those intoxicated by the euphoria of hate spread it like wildfire on the internet. Unchecked, it will break the nation’s back.

Have Americans forgotten the lessons of the Civil War? The most casual reading of history reveals that once discord escapes from Pandora’s box, civilizations become moribund. Where are the statesmen and stateswomen to remind us of this stark reality? Better still, where are the citizens who will stand up and speak against the national self-annihilation of discord?

We celebrate the nation’s birth on the Fourth of July. Our Declaration of Independence is filled with implications for the ages. It gave birth to a new kind of nation before unseen in human history — a nation of people from every race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religious faith or no faith. Americans were no longer subjects of a king but citizens with equal rights.

But can it work?

Duties come with citizenship: Respect the rights of others, support the Constitution, and obey the laws of the land. That’s self-evident. But words alone don’t make things happen anymore than they cook rice.

It takes a habit of personal self-discipline and a decent respect for our fellow citizens, whether we like and agree with them or not. Unless the baser instincts of human nature are harnessed, discord runs rampant. Ultimately the United States Constitution only works with the individual restraint and good will of the American people. Without that, freedom ultimately destroys itself — and us along with it.

Celebrate the birth of our nation, but remember what it takes to make it endure.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of the Human Service Center and author of “Soul of America: Essays on the Fourth of July.” He lives in Groveland.