

Op-Ed: Does Spirit of '76 exist in 2016?

By John F. Gilligan

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Is a government of the people, by the people and for the people now a vanishing way of life?

Some 70 percent of voters (Wall Street/NBC Poll) say the country is on the wrong track. And 60 percent of Democrats and Republicans think that their parties do such a poor job that an alternative is needed.

Illinois stands out as a premier example. Two people battle over whether the state gets a budget or not, pays its bills or not and secures pensions for the future or not. Meanwhile elected representatives look on. That's hardly a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Furthermore, public confidence in our most vital democratic institution, the United States Congress, has been deteriorating since 2012 to the present, historical low of 8 percent.

So we may ask: Beyond a paid holiday and fireworks, does the Fourth of July still have any relevance for America in the 21st century?

Americans clearly seem to be demanding a change — as long as someone else does it. Enthusiasm spikes to standing ovations when presidential candidates assert how much they will fight for or unite us or make America great again. That may indeed feel good. But it could well be a more ominous symptom of a nation that has grown passive and dependent.

Yet the founding of America was driven by the people. Across the colonies Americans were declaring their independence. Rhode Island didn't wait for anyone and declared it on May 4, 1776. Around 90 declarations were made in counties, towns and by civic organizations months before the Continental Congress ever formed a committee to write a Declaration of Independence for 13 "Free and Independent States."

Jefferson wasn't feigning humility when he stated that he had only expressed "the sentiments of the people." Prior to putting his pen to paper, the people had already created their new state constitutions. Voluntary militias had been forming in towns from Maine to Georgia.

When the British attacked Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, New England militias struck back like flash-lightening. Within days they had the British literally bottled up in the city of Boston. Their only exit was by sea, which occurred 17 March 1776.

Lest we forget, it was the Americans who had first attacked. On Sept. 6, 1774, Worcester town militias took possession of the armory. Then they forced the resignations of all political offices held by British appointees in their county and elected their own representatives as replacements. Other Massachusetts town militias followed suit.

Americans weren't waiting to be led; they were taking action in their local communities. They were in the process of making an America, fighting for needed changes. No one was sitting around for someone else to make it happen.

Fed up with British top-down command and control leadership and directives that never ceased but only increased, Americans took control into their own hands. And they were ready and willing to fight to the death for it.

That was the Spirit of '76. Does it exist in 2016?

Only we can make America great. If there are things worth fighting for, we must be the fighters — metaphorically speaking. If America is to be more united, it's pure delusion to think that anyone else can do it for us.

The Patriots of 1776 had their challenges and took the bull by the horns. It's our turn now. We are living in a rapidly changing world order with a multiplicity of problems far more complex than any previous generation. To believe that any one person or group of persons in Washington, D.C. or Springfield is going to solve them for us is equivalent to believing in the Tooth Fairy.

If there is anything to learn from the American Revolution, it's that we the people must assume responsibility for our own and posterity's future. And that starts at the local American community. If it doesn't start there, it starts nowhere.

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