A Reflection on the 250th Anniversary of American Independence

This nation, “America” in our daily language, came into existence in July of 1776, with the Declaration of Independence. Saying so may seem a trivial truism, but we should take nothing for granted. As we approach our quarter-millennium, it’s worth some thought.

Before the Declaration, there had been no American nation, awaiting the chance to throw off foreign rule. The colonies were remote provinces of Britain; colonists were British subjects. It was in the Declaration that we designated ourselves a “People,” taking its own place “among the powers of the earth.” In this people, we first conceived this nation.

Who is this People? The Declaration’s second sentence cites “We,” who avow a faith in certain “Truths:” 1) that rights are equally and inherently endowed in all individuals, and 2) that governments exist to secure those rights, by consent of the governed. Rights include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: each person is entitled to live by their own lights.

“We” identified ourselves only as holders of these truths. So it is this holding, this creed, that defines our self-conception and our nationality. And it is Revolutionary. Where rights had always been privileges granted by lord or king, we hold that they come prior to any human power, and no one can revoke them. Government, which had ruled by divine right, now exists to secure our rights, legitimated by consent of the governed, “we” whose rights they must protect. This same “we,” this People of the United States, promulgated the Constitution in1787, forming a second state for the nation conceived in 1776. We the People create our own nation and government, by the Truths of the Declaration’s creed.

The Declaration also turned the very idea of nation on its head. In divorcing Britain, the signers instilled a new type of national identity, based on common holding of a principle rather than ethnic ties. We should note that this was no call for "democracy;" most signers disdained the idea. But they did stipulate consent of the governed; this sovereign was not a monarch but a People in our shared conviction. The idea of popular sovereignty had been a mind experiment for a century, not yet tried in the real world. And few nations since have set their identity in a concept, all the fewer in such truths as ours. In this novel national identity, America is exceptional.

Our commitment to rights is in a sense idealistic. Creedal aspirations always reach beyond current realities; in 1776 many of the Declaration's signers owned slaves. But our founding instantly transformed slavery and racism, from unsavory facts of life into violations of our terms of existence. Our creed sets a higher destination for our society. We did end slavery. That does not end our call to betterment. The work of realizing

high Truths is never done. This new People bears a burden, alongside our freedom, to keep growing into our creed.

A revolutionary national identity of high Truths is exceptionally hard to carry. Seceding from the divinely sanctioned domain of a king, we also converted blood, soil and church, from ordained bonds of fealty to sources of personal inspiration that I may choose to embrace.

Any people defined by a principle will face trying paradoxes. In freedom we can make ourselves by our own lights; we also live, even today, in a world where ethnic and traditional identities feel natural. How do I honor my ancestral heritage within my national identity of abstract Truths? In another paradox, anyone's personal rights could

always clash with someone else's, so government protection of everyone's rights will outlaw some persons' pursuits. Government will constrain me, not only against crime, in ways I resent. Third, a nationality of rights needs an institutional nation as its worldly vessel. America's vessel has to ensure security, sustainability, prosperity, and other tangible needs – and some necessary measures will breach rights. Draftees fought in the Civil War and World War II.

Can we hold to our Truths through all the trade-offs? In our freedom, we live in constant wrestling, between mounting my rightful pursuits and respecting others'; between keeping social order and safeguarding civil liberties; between loyalty to family ties and fidelity to our civic principles; between promoting peace and defeating national enemies. The need for compromises and trade-offs is not unique to America, but where a Swede can follow traditions that some will call Swedish instinct, our guide is our abstract creed. It still doesn't feel "natural" for most humans.

Yet our nation has grown in our identity of rights, through great social change, sparked from all corners of our society. We did abolish the sin of official slavery and codified that abolition in the Constitution. We continue to work toward the principle of universal suffrage and have built, however fitfully, norms of principled equality under the law. We destroyed totalitarian states abroad, in global wars hot and cold. And this national culture unfetters people for their life pursuits. So long as I respect others' rights, I am free to try any idea, launch any business, espouse any cause, tinker with any gadget, explore any truth. And, if I want, I can just mind my own business. My course is mine to choose.

In our best pursuits, we nurture each others' material and social capacity to live as they choose. Fruits of free pursuits give all humanity a wider and wider view of life's

potential. Cars made the trip to market a matter of minutes, not days; computers give access to knowledge and open windows into others' lives; flush toilets afford almost everyone an underlying dignity that hadn't existed for anyone. The freedom of inventors, artists, entrepreneurs, thinkers, even eccentrics, can enrich life and broaden horizons for all.

The perpetual question is whether any nation "so conceived … can long endure." Will free people govern ourselves, politically and personally, to maintain our living vessel of rights? Old "Realist" views say that people are creatures of self interest, that fear is the ultimate motive, that blood and soil are the true source of order, and that rights are only pleasing illusions to keep hard facts bearable. Can free people use our rights responsibly? Can we keep up the conscientious moral wrestling, the concessions to others' rights, the uncertainty of a new kind of identity, and the cost of running a nation? Are our truths of rights, and government by the people, true? Will we sustain them in a grubby world?

The only answer will come in the results. America is precisely the experiment that it has been called, and new tests will arise in perpetuity.

To date, we have carried our creed implicitly, snapping back to its call when our conduct breaches our tenets, periodically recalling ourselves from unprincipled stumbling. We may now need more explicit awareness of the Declaration's civic moral beacon.

The times are disrupted. We feel less safe, with online scams, reports of abductions and shootings, spreading substance abuse, and more, hanging over daily life. Our civic order, and people's inner morality, all seem to be deteriorating. Many of us see church, culture and tradition as moral bulwarks – our creedal ethos coincides with most (no surprise as it took inspiration from many of them). But new understandings strain those tenets. The heavens have become bits of a "Big Bang" – where did existence

originate? Artificial Intelligence looks more and more like thought – are souls a fantasy? Technology affects the climate – will humans survive? CRISPR alters DNA – is life not sacred creation?

If everything we know might be wrong, can anyone know truth? We may have outgrown "the earth is flat," but older traditions did declare divine reality and morality. Science and philosophy can't replace them; in these matters they leave us only with questions. If no one can know Truth, then what is true? And what is right?

Against this backdrop another problem grows more dangerous by the day. America's politics has fallen into a vicious cycle of alienation. Two factions so dominate public discourse, and focus so tenaciously on political trench warfare, that many of us put partisan identities first. With truth and values under strain, the two sides both claim them, but in contested versions, as mere weapons for their duopolistic standoff. This pathology has a strong hold – even partisans who admit to it will simply blame the other side. If we take identity from partisan interest rather than common creed, we are no longer one People. Our experiment as a nation of principle will have failed.

We need to unwind our politicized polarization. To do that we need everyone to see the Declaration's truths as more fundamental than partisan tropes, and comity in its creed as higher than political differences. For people to see their commonality, they need to see Truths that withstand the disruptions, snd temptations to nihilism, of modern knowledge.

We can take heart from the Declaration's creed. Any truth, it turns out, rests on some article of faith. Our creed, our civic faith, is scientifically and philosophically resilient. There is reason to hold that all humans have the free will that demands rights. "Realists" say our actions are determined by need, but, while an MRI can detect neural impulses that drive our actions, their origins are unknowable and many are inexplicable.

Free will cannot be disproven. Our holding of the self evident Truths is reasonable. The Declaration does not endorse specific religious mores, but our Truths' civic morality coincides with many confessional traditions'. Shifting civic identity from the old world's "natural" ties to the Declaration's civic Truths, we now carry values on that faith in rights that sets our national identity. Those durable tenets give us bedrock amid cosmic uncertainty, and a nation that opens the future to our best strivings. Only we, if we fail to make it work, can undo it.

Americans have lived by our creed, not always fully aware of it, for a quarter of a millennium. No other nation has stood so long in its current form. Still, in the sweep of history, we are young, whereas ethnic identities trace back to the Flood. Will we last, and why or why not? What caused the fall of Rome, the collapse of the Ming Dynasty, or the rise of Athens? We may well ponder. And yet, for America, the parallels, and the length and patterns of history, need not matter. Our identity doesn't bind us to the past, in its old received identities. Ours unfolds into the future, in what our free pursuits may bring into being. America exists to explore new possibilities, not to conform to prior conventions. We are, again, an experiment, of a new idea of nation. The potential future is unknowable, but its possibilities dwarf the past's false certainties - if we keep passing the tests. How that will happen is up to us, each and all together. Proof of America's experiment continues as we validate the Declaration's creed.

This may seem a terrible burden for a mass population, of a People more disparate than any in history, most just trying to make life work. But, whoever "I" am as an individual, whoever our fellow Americans are, proof of our experiment always, ultimately, comes back to "me." I vote, I buy or save, I click or swipe, I can learn others' views or fight or ignore them, I can abridge my morals or keep them, I can try new ways to live or stick with tried and true. We pass or fail our tests as everyone's billions of choices add up to

validate the Declaration's creed - or don't. As with generations before, the nation is me, it supports me, and it depends on me. Holding our Truths and wrestling with freedom's paradoxes together, making our creed ever more real, our one-third of a billion of "me" are "the People."

What more could free people ask, but to have the fate of their freedom in their own hands? We Americans, like our forebears and our descendants, carry this burden and this blessing, from our own founding creed. And it leaves us to make history day by day.

A Short Summary of Readings

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness -That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed ... Here we see the only definition ever laid out, of the "People" who make up the nation conceived in 1776, America. Surprisingly, the literature about the Declaration is fairly compact, whereas libraries are written about the Constitution, even beyond formal legal texts. Still, a lot has been written, over the full 250 years since independence. A very brief summary of some relatively recent works follows:

Perhaps the most compelling overview of Americans' evolving view of the Declaration is Pauline Maier's American Scripture, which tracks conflicting views of the declaration that had been voiced, and varying attitudes to its role in America's definition, into the 19 th Century.

A compare-and-contrast view can be gained from a pair of works, Matthew Spalding's We Still Hold These Truths and These Truths by Jill LePore. Spalding and LePore are clearly conservative and progressive, respectively, in their politics. Spalding points out that the unalienable rights are granted by the Creator, and the bureaucratic architecture of today's nation rests on 19 th Century Progressive Era scientism, which he argues is atheistic. Thus he challenges the legitimacy of today's institutional structures. LePore notes the absence of Natives, Blacks, and women from the process of drawing up the Declaration, and calls the resulting "power of the earth" a "state without a nation." She says America needs to become a nation by integrating those and other constituencies. Despite the differences, both authors refer to the Declaration, and particularly its creed, as America's origin point. Gordon Wood, the great historian of early America, points out in The Radicalism of the American Revolution how even daily life was transformed by the Revolution, and how the new nation put living flesh on the creed of the Declaration. For a detailed parsing of the Declaration's language, Our Declaration by Danielle Allen
connects the actual words of the document to today's contexts. For the effect of the Declaration around the world, David Armitage's The Declaration of Independence: A Global History illustrates the effect of this new nation on international relations.
Anyone looking to get deeper into the history of histories and commentaries on the Declaration will get a strong start by checking notes and references in these works.