

REFLECTIONS

Lawrence P. Grayson

THOUGHTS FOR THE FOURTH OF JULY

The Fourth of July is typically a day of joyous festivities celebrating America's birth as a nation. And so it should be. Today, however, the country is experiencing spirit-wrenching events. The nation has undergone several months of lockdown and restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and religion due to a viral pandemic. Riots have occurred in cities across the country sparked by the egregious death of a black man by an overly combative policeman. Abortion continues to be a nationally divisive issue, with roughly half of the population approving of it and half protesting it, more than 47 years after it was legalized by the Supreme Court. These are not simply the results of disagreements over public policy. Rather, they indicate fundamental differences in the worldview through which the founding values of this country are interpreted – or ignored. On this Independence Day, take a moment to re-read, or perhaps read, the Declaration of Independence. Think about what it says and what it implies.

After a brief statement of purpose, the Declaration states, “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.” This nation was established by people of faith, founded on a belief in a sovereign God who reigns over nations as well as men, who endows each individual with certain innate entitlements.

This view is also the basis of Christian social teaching: We are made in the image and likeness of God. As such, each of us has an innate dignity worthy of respect. As that dignity comes from God, every person has certain intrinsic rights to personal liberty, freedom of conscience, and basic well-being. The Declaration of Independence is a political statement developed by people who had a theistic worldview regarding man. That view was shaped by the teachings of the Christian sects to which they belonged.

A great danger to the nation today is the decline in religious faith and the exclusion of God from consideration in the public affairs. As the permanence of American rights is rooted in the transcendental, a loss of belief in God leads to a loss of belief that the privileges bestowed by Him are intrinsic and unalienable. If God is no longer sovereign, the rights He endowed are no longer immutable. If these rights are to be preserved, then a belief in God must be sustained.

The Declaration continues, “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Hence, the purpose of government is to provide the assurance that people can exercise those pre-existing rights; it does not grant them. Government exists for the people; its authority resides in their will.

The state may ignore or violate these God-endowed rights, but it cannot revoke them. In a secular worldview, in contrast, there is no supernatural authority to which the state is subject. When belief in God is considered a private affair, unrelated to public matters, ultimate authority to define the rights of the individual resides in the state. Those privileges are then provisional, for the state can rescind what it grants.

Although these innate rights are deemed unalienable, they are not unrestricted. Rather, they are subject to a higher natural law that was placed in human nature by the Creator and are to be regulated through one's con-science. This was done so that people would utilize their freedom in a morally and socially acceptable manner.

Indeed, America as a nation of liberty under law could not be sustained if the public was not inwardly governed by a higher imperative. Religion thus plays a significant role in support of governance by fostering public virtue among the citizenry so that they are capable of governing themselves with righteous norms.

The concluding sentence of the Declaration of Independence reads: “[W]ith a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” What was intended by the expression “sacred Honor”? In Colonial America, honor referred to traits of character of the individual. It defined a person’s sense of self-worth, his personal qualities and self-esteem. It meant living a life with integrity, guided by an internalized set of moral standards, in accordance with the natural and revealed laws. It was in effect the core of his identity.

It was their sacred honor which they pledged to support an idea – that there are certain unalienable rights bestowed by a Creator God – that led the 56 signers of the Declaration to make great sacrifices to establish this nation. In asserting that the 13 united colonies were free and independent, they became traitors to England, the country of which they were subjects. If the Revolution failed, many, if not all, would likely have been hanged and their property forfeited to the Crown. As it was, many of them suffered greatly, both during and after the Revolution. Yet, not one defected or recanted on his pledge.

This is part of the legacy that we have received from the nation’s founders and which has been added to by generations of Americans who have toiled, contributed to and sacrificed for this country. This heritage is often reflected in the spirit of the nation, and expressed as a pride in its history, traditions, symbols, and achievements, and in the genius of its people. Through these elements of culture, one often develops feelings of allegiance to the country.

This affection for the nation is patriotism. A healthy loyalty to the nation is not an uncritical commitment to its every aspect, but rather demands recognition of the country’s failings and shortcomings and inspires efforts to improve them. Patriotism is a commitment to the ideals upon which the nation was founded and to what it can be.

On this Fourth of July, enjoy the parades, flags, music, firework displays, and family gatherings. But also re-call the values upon which this country was founded – ideals such as freedom, equality, human dignity, justice. And where the nation has fallen short, commit yourself on your sacred honor to live your life according to those values. One patriot may not change the country, but the country will not change until there is a first patriot.

* * * * *

July 2020