

Why Celebrate the Fourth of July?

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This weekend, millions of Americans will celebrate the Fourth of July. But the holiday has often been the occasion for boycotts, protests and demonstrations that go beyond the fireworks. This year like last, many women will be marching to reclaim their bodily independence. While some Native tribes salute Indian veterans on this day, others remember how for decades the approach of an American flag was not seen as a good omen. Independence Day has always evoked mixed reactions, particularly within the black community.

In 1852, Frederick Douglas delivered a fiery address asking “What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” At that time, three and a half million African Americans were considered human property. As a black man born into bondage on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, Douglas found the festivities galling.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.

These many years later, the question still resonates. Why celebrate? Why fly the stars and stripes? Should Americans be proud or ashamed of a revolution that left millions in chains? That required another Civil War to abolish slavery and then many more lifetimes of sacrifice to bring us to this point where voting rights remain in jeopardy and where affirmative action is being dismantled by a Supreme Court beholden to billionaires?

Plans are already underway to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, three short years from now. If you were around for the bicentennial, you may have to get used to hearing about the semiquincentennial coming up. That’s quite a mouthful! But of course July 4 is just one date on a calendar, and the war for independence didn’t actually begin in 1776. Shots had been fired much earlier, in 1770, when Crispus Attucks, a black man, became the first casualty to fall in the Boston Massacre. Tensions between the crown and the colonies were escalating, and as battle lines were forming then, so wars are now raging in our schools and universities. Last year, the Florida legislature passed a bill forbidding classroom instruction that might make students feel uncomfortable with their racial heritage. Texas has enacted similar legislation making it illegal for teachers to mention that part of what the defenders of the Alamo were defending was a right to own and trade

slaves. Some demand a whitewashed and sanitized version of America's past. But of course some aspects of our history should make us uncomfortable. More than that, they should make us weep.

What is there to celebrate? In her Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones argued that the primary purpose of the American Revolution was to promote and preserve slavery. But it's important to get the history right. Because nations and peoples who have no agreed-on narrative about their past tend to lose faith in their future.

The facts are these. In 1775, Virginia's English Governor, Lord Dunmore, proclaimed that slaves who deserted their American masters would be welcomed into the British army as free citizens. Multitudes did so, and within a month, Dunmore had a black regiment at his command to quell unrest in the colonies. It was only then, the argument goes, with the prospect of losing their enslaved property, that delegates in Philadelphia were moved to put their signatures to the parchment declaring independence from King George.

Yet the skirmishing had begun long before Dunmore's provocation. Prior to that, there was the Tea Party. There were Lexington and Concord. There was the creation of a Continental Army to resist British rule. And there was Bunker Hill. Because muskets were so inaccurate in those days, the Continentals were given the command, "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." In the melee that followed, the redcoats were savaged. A quarter of all the British officers who died during seven years of warfare fell in that single encounter. One of those shot through the brain was the British major John Pitcairn, killed by a former slave named Peter Salem. Indeed a study for the National Park Service found that one hundred and three of the American soldiers in that battle were men of color.

You may have learned in your high school history that Harry Truman was the first U.S. President to integrate the armed forces. Actually, George Washington was.

All told, over 5000 African Americans served in uniform during the Revolution. Their personal stories are mostly lost. Often we only have their names from muster rolls where the officers bear Yankee names like Nathaniel and Edmund and Ethan, while the enlisted men are called Scipio, Pomp, Prince, Caesar and Sampson. Their surnames were sometimes those of their white owners, but other times names they'd chosen for themselves like Freeman and Liberty. Blacks were there at every major engagement; they were there at Valley Forge, at Trenton, at Yorktown.

Rhode Island was the first and only colony to offer slaves complete emancipation in return for putting on a uniform. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton urged other colonies to follow suit, but the resistance was too great. Yet other colonies offered their own inducements to

serve. The pay was the same for black and white recruits. Continental dollars might not be worth much. But with the money, some slaves were able to buy their own freedom, or to purchase their loved ones out of bondage. In some colonies, men of substance might entice a slave to serve as a substitute in the army, with a promise of liberation at the end. In 1782, when the war was finally won, the Virginia assembly chastised masters who reneged on their pledge, declaring that “all who contributed towards the establishment of American liberty and independence” should enjoy the blessings of freedom.

Life was hard for all the troops, food and clothing in short supply, and blacks shared the common lot. None were officers, although records suggest that some were corporals, among the NCOs. Some colonies restricted African Americans to non-combat functions, like fife and drum, understandably reluctant to put guns into hands where the barrels might be turned back on their former overseers. But fife and drum paid more than ordinary infantry, probably because they were hazard duty. Fifers were in the front lines, where they were signalmen. Drums told the troops when to advance, flank right, or stand fast. The musicians carried daggers to counter the bayonets that were deadlier than the flintlocks of that era. And in the heat of battle, evidence suggests that regardless of regulations, every man who could wield a weapon did his part.

Black soldiers absorbed the ethos of their compatriots. The lines about “self-evident truths” and “inalienable rights” became part of their moral vocabulary, echoed in pleas for their own full equality. Without knowing it, they became Lockean liberals, convinced that human relations rested upon a social contract, and that no man could deprive another of liberty without the first man’s consent. In the famous painting of “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” for example, you spot one dark face among the crew toiling at the oars. That face belonged to Prince Whipple, born in Africa and transported to the Americas. Prince served in the Continental Army alongside his master. But in 1779, in the midst of the conflict, two years before he became a free man, he and nineteen other slaves petitioned the New Hampshire legislature in language that could have come from Thomas Jefferson or Ben Franklin, noting that the:

God of Nature gave them Life and Freedom, upon the Terms of the most perfect Equality with other men, That Freedom is an inherent right of the human Species, not to be surrendered, but by Consent, for the Sake of social Life; that private or public Tyranny and Slavery, are alike detestable to Minds conscious of the equal Dignity of human Nature ...

Men like Prince Whipple were not just armed with muskets. They were armed with ideas that were every bit as powerful and in some ways even more explosive. Soldiers of color who had fought and prevailed against the mightiest empire on earth, walked and talked with a new

confidence in themselves, inferior to no one. Perhaps they weren't full citizens yet, but they were warriors. And having fought to create the new nation, they had a deeper belief and investment in its founding ideals. They brought those ideals home with them in the form of war stories to share with children and later descendants who never forgot and never surrendered.

America would never be the same. Their service created a debt to be honored, a debt that was at least recognized if not on the most generous terms. In 1818, Congress passed a Pension Act for the relief of Revolutionary War veterans who could prove financial need, and a higher percentage of blacks than whites qualified for the aid, probably because they were poorer overall. Perhaps too because they had enlisted for longer terms. White soldiers typically served a year or two, while more black recruits signed on for the duration, meaning their contribution to the war effort counted for more. Length of service also made it easier to obtain an affidavit from some other old timer who remembered their bygone comrades-in-arms. Many blacks had earned awards for meritorious service, but few saved their discharge papers. Those papers still extant were often signed by General Washington himself—documents attesting the man had indeed been a soldier — not a Negro soldier, but just a soldier like any other. Bureaucrats in the new capitol on the Potomac that was being constructed with slave labor mostly granted these vets the eight dollars a month that kept them from destitution. Yet slavery persisted and even tightened its grip in the South. Several Northern states that once granted blacks the right to vote disenfranchised African Americans once the war was over. The nation was not entirely grateful.

Times were hard for African Americans and about to become harder. Cotton was becoming more profitable, and greed was trumping good intentions. But times had also changed. In her book *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* published by the University of Oklahoma Press, scholar Judith Van Buskirk observes that before 1760, very few Americans questioned the institution of slavery. It was a fact of life, like the weather. People might not always like it, but no one believed they had any agency or could do anything about it. Slavery was a piece of the social landscape, background noise like death and taxes. But in the space of a generation, something happened. "By 1790," she observes, "the northern states had put slavery on the road to extinction. The Constitutional Convention heatedly debated the role of slavery and representation. Abolition societies and aid societies sprang up in the north and south. What happened between 1765 and 1790? The American Revolution. After twenty years of talking about natural rights, equality and freedom had made it such that the institution of slavery would never more be part of the monotonous course of daily life."

It would take generations to see the effects. It would take the American Revolution. It would take the Thirteenth Amendment. It would take mass movements and organizations and popular uprisings. It would take Montgomery and Selma and Black Lives to pass the torch

forward. The flame of freedom faltered at times. It seems to flicker now, as our nation copes with white nationalists, with Proud Boys and Bugaloos, with police murders and resurgent hate. But none of this should keep us from marking our Independence Day. For despite his recent coronation, Charles is not our king. Camilla is not our queen. We inhabit a nation founded on principles quite different from those of the hereditary right of some to rule over others. A nation that still clings to the ideal of equality and the enfranchisement of all.

Frederick Douglas in 1852 acknowledged as much.

Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men,, too, great enough to give frame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory....

I do not despair of this country.

I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from "the Declaration of Independence," the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions ...

Those institutions are fragile, always in danger, and always in need of reform. So protest if you like. Boycott. Practice your right of free speech and freedom to assemble. Our nation began in protest. And the best way to celebrate that fact is to work for justice.

Because America's is an unfinished revolution, a revolution in progress, a revolution with a long way to go but with a notable beginning. Learn your history and then earn your history. Fly your flag right side up or upside down or not at all, but know why you're doing it. Educate yourself. We have no need to bury or renounce or censor our past, nor any need to romanticize or gloss over it either. For all its imperfections, it's a heritage worth remembering.