

Today we're celebrating our nation's 245th birthday. 245 years ago today we declared our independence. Well, almost...

Technically the Continental Congress declared independence on July 2, 1776. That great patriot John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail,

"The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable (turning point¹) in the History of America... I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival... It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

Well, John Adams was right about the celebration, but off by a couple of days on the date. We Americans have ended up celebrating July 4, the day the written Declaration of Independence was adopted, rather than July 2, the day that Independence itself was actually declared and voted on.

But Independence is a wonderful cause for celebration, whether on July 2 or July 4. And what amazes me about the founding generation is the risks they took in declaring independence. At the end of the Declaration of Independence they make this amazing statement:

"With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Divine Providence means God. They were trusting, they were firmly relying on God's protection. AND they were pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

If things had turned out differently, if Britain had won, the founders' sacred honor might have remained intact. But their lives and their fortunes would have been forfeit—their assets would have likely been seized and they would probably have been executed by hanging. And yet, they risked their lives and fortunes in order to secure liberty for themselves and for us. And for that we owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude.

We often tend to treat historical events as if they were inevitable. America won its independence in the Revolutionary War after all. Wasn't that the likely outcome?

Actually, no. Winning independence was NOT a certainty at all. In fact, it bordered on the miraculous. For a small, rag-tag citizen army to defeat Great Britain, the most powerful military force in the world at that time, was highly unlikely.

Historian David McCullough says this about the eventual American victory at Yorktown:

"To those who had been with (George) Washington and who knew what a close call it was at the beginning ... the outcome seemed little short of a miracle."²

¹ Adam's actual word was "Epocha," an archaic term for the beginning of a new epoch

² David McCullough, *1776*

And there was great sacrifice. The American military forces suffered terrible losses on the battlefield, about 25,000 casualties, almost 1% of the American population at that time.³ The equivalent level of casualties given our population today would be a little over 3,000,000 people. The founding generation paid a heavy price so that we might share the benefits of freedom almost two-and-a-half centuries later. Thus we have much to be thankful for on this July 4th.

Our founders said they were relying upon God's protection, moving forward into the future, in their words, "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."

Our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah speaks wonderfully about this theme.

The prophet tells us,
"Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock."⁴

And he says a verse before that, that trust in God is the source, the only source of true peace:
"Those of steadfast mind you (God) keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you."⁵

It is an important reminder to us, this July 4th and every day. Ultimate trust must always be in God.

It's tempting to put our ultimate trust in ourselves, either ourselves singular as individuals, or ourselves plural as a nation. It is tempting to place our ultimate trust in our nation's military or economic might. But these are all spiritual traps.

As the prophet Isaiah says,
"(God) has brought low the inhabitants of the height; the lofty city he lays low. He lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust."⁶

That was certainly the pattern in the American Revolution: the mighty British were humbled. As the British surrendered at Yorktown, their band supposedly played a song marking this great reversal: "The World Turned Upside Down."

But now, 240 years after Yorktown, the tables have turned. We are now the most powerful nation in the history of the world. So we must be very careful spiritually. God has richly blessed us in our country.

But as Spiderman said, "With great power comes great responsibility." Or as Jesus originally said it, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return."⁷

³ Ibid.

⁴ Isaiah 26:4

⁵ Isaiah 26:3

⁶ Isaiah 26:5

⁷ Luke 12:48

As a country, we have a mixed report card. We have lofty ideals that have inspired the world, but we haven't always been able to live up to them. There are times that America has fallen short in our history. We have done some dark things in the past.

But we have also had shining moments when we have been able to live more fully into our ideals. One of my favorite instances is in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Nazi Germany was certainly one of the most evil regimes in the history of the world. And going to war against them to stop their destructiveness was certainly appropriate. But in the years after WWII, we as a nation did a remarkable thing.

During the war, General George C. Marshall was the army Chief of Staff. He was pivotal in defeating Nazism. Winston Churchill called him "THE Organizer of (the Allied) Victory."

But after Hitler was defeated, Marshall led the United States in a different way. As Secretary of State after the war, he used his considerable influence to push our country into aiding and rebuilding our fallen enemies.

The Marshall Plan is perhaps the greatest example in the history of the world of one nation reaching out and helping its defeated foe. And eventually, Marshall who was instrumental in winning the war, would also win the Nobel Peace Prize.

When we're at our best, we get glimpses, like the Marshall Plan, of what it means to live more fully into our ideals as Americans.

Which reminds us where our ultimate hope lies. As wonderful as our American ideals are, our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah reminds us that we need to place our trust in something even stronger—we need to trust ultimately in the living God.

Thanks be to God for 245 years of independence.

May God help us to live more fully according to our ideals.

And "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence," may God help us to more fully trust in him.