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# Ask Hard Questions, Demand Real Answers, Restore Freedom

By Robin Meadow  
and Stephen F. Rohde

With the Fourth of July approaching, we should pause and reflect on the true meaning of Independence Day.

Our revered Declaration of Independence is one of the most powerful political documents ever written. It changed the world, and its bold declarations that "all men are created equal" and are entitled to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" have been models for aspiring democracies throughout the world.

But is America itself such a model?

Certainly no one can deny that life has improved dramatically since a group of white male slave owners framed our founding documents — although it took a bloody Civil War, several amendments to the Constitution and the enactment of various civil rights laws to begin to extend fundamental rights to all of those originally excluded in 1776. But how well do we live up to the stirring words of America's Founders? How close are we to a society based on justice, peace, tolerance, compassion and equality?

In the political arena, we face daily setbacks in the name of the so-called war on terrorism. As we consider how this war is being waged, it is wise to recall our Founders' vision.

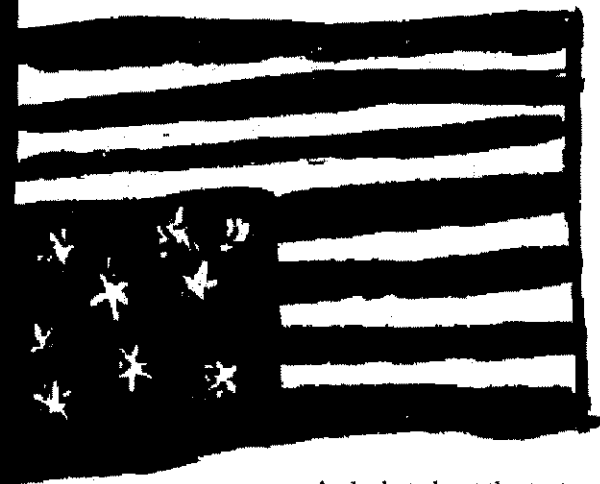
The Founders understood that a nation based on the consent of the people deserves to be both safe and free. They believed that these are compatible, not irreconcilable, goals. But when a government ignores its people, violates their rights, and embarks on undeclared wars, its people are not free. And when that government's conduct openly and aggressively invites retaliation, terrorism and ever-widening armed conflict, its people are not safe.

It is important and timely to note just how many of King George's injustices and abuses that the Founders catalogued in the Declaration of Independence are confronting us today. Among other things, the King "obstructed the Administration of Justice," "made judges dependent on his Will alone" and deprived the people "of the benefits of trial by Jury."

These abuses sound chillingly like some of the things that are happening in the name of the war on terrorism: removing the judiciary from monitoring the actions of the executive branch; closing immigration hearings from public scrutiny; eavesdropping on confidential communications between attorneys and their clients; detaining citizens and noncitizens alike indefinitely, without charging them with any

crimes, without affording them access to legal counsel and without presenting evidence against them at a trial by jury.

The King "affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power." How different is this from the creation — without congressional participation — of military commissions to secretly try noncitizens without affording them all the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the Code of Military Justice and international law? And what about transferring suspects from the civilian criminal-justice system into indefinite military incarceration?



And what about the torturing of prisoners, and the related effort — thankfully now abandoned — to gain immunity for American troops from prosecution by the International Criminal Court?

Our Founders' social and economic aspirations are equally threatened. If all men and women are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, how can it be that America is the richest nation on the earth but has the greatest disparity of wealth in the entire industrialized world? Here, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population owns more than the bottom 95 percent combined, and 16 percent of children live in poverty. And, perhaps because of the fact that over the last quarter century workers' wages have remained flat or declined, the average American now works 163 hours, or one month a year, more than in 1969, according to a Harvard University study.

Our society's response? Under the most recent round of federal tax cuts, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population will enjoy 52 percent of the tax benefits when the cuts are fully operative. Over the next 10 years, the tax plan will direct \$500 billion that could have funded much-needed social programs into the bank accounts of those earning \$375,000 or more a year. In today's America, the privileged few are pursuing a lot more happiness than everyone else.

And in the face of all this, voter turnouts continue to be at record lows.

How did we get this way? When King George got abusive, Americans refused to lie down and take it. Today, we are lying down, complacently accepting the same kinds of abuses that sparked the Revolution, and ignoring the aspirations that drove our Founders to revolt. In the process, we are forfeiting the right to be seen as a beacon for the world.

Fortunately, we don't need a second revolution to stop the abuses. Our marvelous Constitution and Bill of Rights give us all the tools we need. But we have to use them, and to use them we have to be well informed — it was, after all, Thomas Jefferson who wrote that, "An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic." Beyond that, we must exercise our freedom of speech, by asking hard questions and demanding honest answers. We must exercise our freedom of assembly and association by supporting and participating in organizations that are defending civil liberties and the rule of law. We must protect freedom of the press and oppose censorship in any form. And most important of all, we have to vote.

As we gather with family and friends on the Fourth of July to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, we should pause to measure just how far we have progressed toward the Founders' vision of equal rights and economic justice and how far we still have to go.

And we should commit ourselves to doing what it takes to get there.

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