

The Free State Foundation

A Free Market Think Tank For Maryland...Because Ideas Matter

July 3, 2008

From the FSF Blog which may be accessed at www.freestatefoundation.org

Independence Day 2008

For me, birthdays are a time for looking back as well as forward. After the traditional joyous “Happy Birthday to You” chorus usually comes the insistent “How Old Are You Now?” line. “How Old Are You Now?” “How Old Are You Now?”

Confronting that question has a way of focusing the mind in the nature of a taking stock exercise. What has been accomplished thus far and what remains to be done? What promise has been realized? What promise thus far unrealized?

With the approach of this July 4th, perhaps especially because it is a quadrennial election year, I have been thinking of America’s birthday in terms not unlike the way I think of my own. “America, how old are you now?”

Two hundred thirty two years old if you reckon from July 4, 1776. Or even if you prefer 1788, when New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution, still old, by most accounts. Old, indeed. But I have had fixed in my mind of late counting another way. And by this reckoning America seems very young.

Think of America in this way. When I was born in 1946, there were still Americans living who were born during the Civil War. It’s true. I recall as a young man reading their obituaries in the newspaper. And when those Americans were born during the Civil War, there were still many Americans living who were born during the Revolutionary War, some of whom who were born in 1776, in America’s birth year. Viewed this way, America is only three lifetimes old. Or, more truly, three lifetimes young.

I’ve been turning over this thought in my mind for a week or so now – America as 232 years old, or America as three lifetimes young. I can see America through both lenses. But ever the glass-half-full optimist, I think I prefer three lifetimes young.

To be sure, at the Founding, for all its promise and ideals, America was a construct in which the gap between aspiration and reality was monumental. A

nation that proclaims in its ringing Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and sanctions human bondage in its Constitution of 1787 is built on a contradiction that must be eliminated. The elimination took the shedding of the blood of brothers and much more so that the Union could continue the journey towards fulfilling the promise of the Founding ideals.

The flaw in America’s original construct should never be ignored or forgotten. But neither should the promise of the Founding ideals ever be forgotten, or the achievement of the Founders be diminished. For the ideals were as monumentally important, for America and the world, as the gap between aspiration and reality.

So, on this Independence Day, I opt to think of America as only three lives young, rather than 232 years old. Either way, I think of America as a Republic always looking forward – towards a future full of promise in a never-ending quest to secure the rights of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” As the Declaration announces, it is to secure these inalienable rights that “Governments are instituted among Men.”

The Constitution’s preamble says we bound ourselves together in order to form a “more perfect” union, not an already perfected one. The Free State Foundation’s website proudly proclaims the Foundation’s purpose to promote, through research and education, free markets, limited government, and rule of law principles. To my mind, these fundamental principles are central to preserving the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that is the core object of our constitutional commitment. And they are central to the success of America’s constant striving to become a more perfect union.

So, on this Independence Day 2008, it is appropriate to recognize how much of America’s promise already has been fulfilled, how much already has been accomplished. But there is much more work to be done in a still young nation that ever will be in the process of becoming a “more perfect” union.

Happy Birthday America!

Posted by Randolph J. May on July 3, 2008.

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