

A Community of Truth

Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit [of truth] which prizes liberty as the heritage of all humanity, in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors.

—Abraham Lincoln

Every since the founding of the United States, Americans have been described as ‘cosmic optimists.’ As the new nation began to ponder the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, slowly recognizing it as the ‘charter of the American Dream,’ the revolutionary implications of July 4, 1776, have taken root within the world’s collective consciousness. This justification of the American Revolution provided a set of measures by which people on all continents might not only assess their own march towards modernity, but even critically judge the very nation that first proclaimed them --and continues to do so -- as universal standards.

What was ‘new’ was the very thought that the world could be created anew. Until this time, the popular idea of progress was actually regress—all good things had happened in the past. Before the eighteenth century people routinely accepted that to be happy they must travel back in time and recreate a lost ‘golden age.’ After 1776, most Americans became convinced that membership in a community was not an ‘involuntary inheritance,’ but rather an ‘explicit allegiance.’ Thoreau, as usual, put it best when he insisted that American identity be based on an ‘imagined destiny,’ a ‘natural’ power shared by all people to transform their social, political and individual lives. American reliance on this power, both conscious and unconscious, implanted agency, experimentation, and creativity into the very heart of American character. Implicit in this vision is a radically unfamiliar understanding of the meaning of ‘rights.’ The immigrants to the ‘New World’ had left their home countries because the social systems under which they lived seemed more like prisons than communities. They didn’t see individual freedom as disassociated from communal responsibilities. Exercising a right and performing a duty were two sides of the same coin. This older language of rights and duties was made revolutionary in the Declaration of Independence through an appeal to ‘nature,’ the eighteenth century’s word for ‘reality.’ American optimism could not be based upon lies, commonly called “crimes against reality.”

In 1776, assertions of freedom and claims of equality were dependent on this shared commitment to the pursuit of truth. The Founders called this collective search ‘science,’ a term many Enlightenment political and social thinkers used interchangeably with ‘natural religion.’ Both ways of thinking revealed avenues to human happiness. Public policy might be required to rest upon publicly

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demonstrable truths, but in the interest of truth, individual explorations into the mystery of the universe may not be repressed. Our Founders realized that science itself progressed through daring demonstrations of genius, far beyond the capacity of ordinary people to properly assess. But unless these insights could be framed through convincing appeals to common sense and experience, their applications to law and policy could not secure the consent of the governed.

Basing a system of fundamental rights and responsibilities on the clarity of reason and acceptance of its findings is the most ambitious part of the American Dream. We should not be surprised that today's leadership, public and private, has decided it is easier to govern through the fog of deceit. Truth is replaced by opinion and all opinions are equal. The only criterion for determining if a certain opinion will prevail is the political power of those promoting it. In response people throughout the United States have been engaged (since 1976 according to one recent book) in a 'Great Sorting.' They are creating tens of thousands of like-minded communities through physical migrations to towns and neighborhoods, or, when moving is not an option, virtual networks through technical means.

These new communities may not be the final form in which the search for truth is reestablished as the basis for law and policy, but the message is obvious.

Localization, intimacy and direct person-to person contact is the first requirement of testing the truth of what we are told. Educations crafted to the needs of the individual and enlightened decision-making are inextricably intertwined. The American Revolution continues, awaiting a new interpretation of the American Dream.

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