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Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Complicated Commemorations

Donald Trump's aversion to admitting fault suggests that we will not likely see events that grapple with the nuanced nature of the nation's history this July 4th.

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Commemorations often tell us as much about the times in which they are being held as they do about the events they are commemorating. The two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, this July 4th, falls at a moment when the nation is being led by a twice-impeached President amid a widely recognized crisis of democracy—last Wednesday, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Louisiana v. Callais* further weakened an already enfeebled Voting Rights Act—and in a social climate whose volatility might be measured by acts of political violence. The most dramatic recent example came with the frantic apprehension of an armed man in the hotel where the White House Correspondents' Association dinner was being held. The alleged gunman fortunately did not reach the ballroom where the President and the other attendees were gathered, but he has been charged with an assassination attempt—the third made against Donald Trump in two years. This is the backdrop against which our recollections of the nation's origins are taking place.

Commemoration has been a complicated undertaking in this country from the start. On July 4, 1826, President John Quincy Adams decided to forgo making a major speech and instead rode by carriage in a parade to the Capitol, where he listened to

celebratory remarks and a reading of the Declaration. He would later find out that two of his predecessors—his father, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson—had died that day. Once fierce rivals, the two men were responsible for the country's first peaceful transfer of power between parties, after Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party defeated Adams and the Federalists in the election of 1800.

The nation's centennial, in 1876, arrived in the wake of a civil war that had left some seven hundred thousand Americans dead. The Declaration's insurrectionist contention—that people, when unjustly provoked, have the right to dissolve their government—hung heavily in a country that had just witnessed the eleven states of the Confederacy make the same argument. That year, President Ulysses S. Grant, who had commanded the Union forces, spoke in his annual address to Congress of the great economic and social progress that the United States had made during its first hundred years. But, though the guns of war were a decade in the past, the nation had not escaped the spectre of conflict. The Presidential election of 1876 pitted the Democrat Samuel J. Tilden against the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, but disputed returns from Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina, where there had been violence directed at Black voters, cast the results into doubt. With neither candidate gaining a clear majority in the Electoral College, the election was turned over to a special commission, which declared Hayes the winner. A compromise was then struck, insuring that Hayes could take office in exchange for the Republicans' promising to cease the federal occupation of the former Confederate states—thereby ending the period known as Reconstruction. Grant was compelled to celebrate the nation's hundredth anniversary just as its boldest experiment in democracy to date was being dismantled.

The nation's bicentennial, the only major commemoration in living memory, was framed by the exigencies of the Cold War and by the scarcely healed scars of the

Vietnam War, as well as by Watergate and President Richard Nixon's consequent resignation. President Gerald Ford's Fourth of July address hit the boilerplate notes of progress and enduring values in a speech so anodyne that his audience might have overlooked the fact that the national festivities were being led by a man who had been elected to neither the Vice-Presidency (Nixon appointed him, in 1973) nor the Presidency (he assumed that office when Nixon resigned). The cumulative lesson of all this recollection is that, in commemorating the past, we may not like all that it calls attention to in the present.

There are other contexts worth considering at this moment. The semiquincentennial inherently underscores the comparative youth of the United States; Italy, Greece, China, and India count their historic legacies in millennia, not centuries. At the same time, the past two hundred and fifty years of popular self-government represent a global milestone: the Declaration of Independence marks the birth of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. Those divergent truths point to the sober reality that the vast majority of people who have existed on this planet lived under some form of tyranny. The events of July 4, 1776, signalled a partial departure from a miserably well-worn path in human history. In that light, two hundred and fifty years seems like a very long time.

The meaning of the Declaration was not entirely clear at the outset, even to those who wrote or signed it. With the haphazard spelling of the era, the signers refer to themselves in the final paragraph of the document as "Representatives of the united States." The use of the lowercase with the word "united" suggests that it is serving as an adjective, not as a herald of the new nation's name. (A subsequent line refers to the confederation as "United Colonies"—there were still things to be ironed out.) Notably, it was not until after the end of the Civil War that American grammar reliably described the United States in the singular: "the United States is"

rather than “the United States are.” Other editorial decisions in the founding document were less ambiguous. Jefferson’s first draft contained a hundred-and-sixty-eight-word denunciation of the transatlantic slave trade, which was excised from the final text. A seed of conflict was sown in that moment.

Donald Trump’s personal aversion to admitting fault suggests that we will not likely see commemorations that grapple with the nuanced, complicated nature of the country’s founding and subsequent history this Fourth of July. What is more likely is that, fifty years hence, Americans will observe that this anniversary took place during a polarizing time, but that such circumstances were not unprecedented. One version of the nation’s history anchors itself in the efforts to navigate those tempests, to better the imperfect tools bequeathed to us by imperfect men. This more mature approach to our past recognizes that national greatness does not exist without a simultaneous reckoning with national failure—and that this undertaking, rather than diminishing American standing, is the surest path toward a country where “united” is as much an aspiration as an adjective. ♦

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