

# July 4: A Time For Celebration And Mourning



US constitution

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On July 4 we celebrate our Independence Day and the founding of our nation. We gather with friends and family for picnics and fireworks, hear patriotic music, eat too much, and affirm that America has been blessed. However, in the midst of our festivities, we should find time to mourn the choices of our Founding Fathers that haunt us still. That is the duality of American history. We are the most successful democracy in the world, but we have carried the consequences of slavery and racism with us since our founding.

The core of the United States, government for the people and by the people, is worth celebrating. It was announced in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and defended in the "Federalist Papers" (1787-1788). In Paper No. 1, Alexander Hamilton, not yet a Broadway celebrity, asked whether they could establish "good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."

Unlike other nations that originated by conquest or by accident, the United States is based on reasoning and the advanced sciences of the day. In 1785, John Adams

wrote, “When government shall be considered as having in it nothing more mysterious or divine than other arts or sciences, we may expect that improvements will be made in the human character and the state of society.”

In 1783, George Washington asserted that the United States was founded when “the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind.”

The Founding Fathers’ great social experiment—to create a government based on reason and compromise—has been a profound success and given us the many freedoms we enjoy today. That is worth celebrating. However, to persuade Southerners to support the Union, the founders compromised on the question of slavery. “Reflection and choice,” two intellectual virtues, were not sufficient to undo the investment in black bodies. Generations of African Americans, and the nation as a whole, have suffered for that contradiction. That is what we must mourn.

James Madison, “Father of the Constitution” and the fourth U.S. President, embodied that contradiction. Himself a slave owner, Madison addressed slavery in Federalist Paper No. 54 (February 12, 1788). If slaves were merely property they should be taxed as such; if they were full-fledged persons they should count in the national census. Southerners objected to the first solution; Northerners objected to the second. Instead, Madison offered a contradictory answer: slaves were *both* movable property *and* human beings: “The true state of the case is, that [slaves] partake of both these qualities: being considered by our laws, in some respects, as persons, and in other respects as property.”

Slaves “partake of both qualities” only because that incoherent lie served Southern and Northern interests at the time. Although Madison’s contradiction was stunning, he and his fellow slaveowners recognized the humanity of slaves. They did not purge themselves of every human sentiment. They confronted an internal divide, rooted in human nature and their Christian consciences. It resided in their hearts even as it hovered over the Constitution and the Declaration, issued at America’s political birth. Founders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry—slave owners—who demanded their rights from the English king perceived the irony that they did so while they conspired to deprive others of theirs. In private letters and in public debates some of them acknowledged their anguish over this contradiction.

That anguish did not stop them from inserting Madison's contradiction into the Constitution of 1787. It festered there until the end of the Civil War. The harm it did to slaves and their descendants—and to Native Americans—is nearly incalculable. The founders' affirmation of reasoning about governance we celebrate; their abandonment of shared human dignity—at the very beginning of the Union—we mourn. Recognizing their stature and their errors we should retain their monuments but take up the unfinished work of repairing injustices begun a long time ago.

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