

A Reminder of What the 4th of July Means

By Victor Davis Hanson

Today is the 4th of July, and I'd like to remind everybody what the 4th of July is.

It's the formal date when the Second Continental Congress—about a year and four months after the shots heard around the world, the first shots of the [Revolutionary War](#) at Lexington and Concord, were fired—the Second Continental Congress decided to formally disband the 13 colonies from Great Britain.



Now, two days earlier, Richard Henry Lee of the famous Lee family—he was the first cousin of Light Horse Harry Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee—had introduced an amendment

called the Lee Resolution that formally was approved and said we are divorcing ourselves from Great Britain. But two days later, John Adams and mostly Thomas Jefferson decided they needed a more holistic document that would list 23 grievances, why it was necessary. So that version of Jefferson, and to a lesser extent, Adams, became the formal Declaration of Independence. And it was ratified on July 4th.

And we all know it from our high school days, or we should. The first famous line, "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to disband ..." And then, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," the first line of the second paragraph. So, it's a foundational document.

And it doesn't mean that men are God. When [Jefferson wrote](#) "that all men are created equal," it doesn't mean that they were equal at that time. But it gave an aspirational goal that, if you think about it, would put the Founders out of business, so to speak. Because if all men are created equal and you create this wonderful place, and you don't have a blood and soil argument that only the people who were here and related to the Founders by race and ethnicity are Americans, but all men are equal, people will flock to the United States. And they might not look like the original Founders. But they would represent the original Founders. They would be the same type of people by ideas and values.

And so the idea of America was really established with the [4th of July](#). And we're going to have the 250th anniversary a year from now that will celebrate the 250 years of the United States of America. Today, it's the 249th anniversary of the 4th of July. This is not the Constitution that will be ratified in 1787 and will formally establish the government. Fourth of July declares that the 13 colonies who have been at war with Great Britain for about 14 or 15 months, and are operating on what we will call the Articles of Confederation, will then free themselves at the Battle of Yorktown. And then they will have a new type of government, which we now call the U.S. Constitution.

There's a couple of other things to remember on the 4th of July. The British have a very different idea than we do when they look at the 23 grievances. They said, "Wow, you guys have it pretty easy. We've been as nice to you, or better, than the people in Canada. And we have all these Commonwealths and

they're not revolting." And if you want to look at an interesting document, read "The Great Historian." A good friend of mine, Andrew Roberts, has addressed all 23 grievances from the British point of view and said, "Ah, that was nothing. Oh, they were crybabies. You shouldn't have done it."

It was an interesting argument. But it has a phenomenal effect on history because if you look at Canada, if you look at New Zealand, if you look at the former South Africa, if you look at any of the British commonwealths, or for that matter, any country in Europe, they follow a parliamentary system. But the Founders who created the United States—and through this Revolutionary War learned about what was wrong with the British and what were the alternatives for consensual government, came up with this tripartite based on Montesquieu and the separation of powers. It goes back to the Spartan and Cretan constitution, antiquity. They came up with a unique government of checks and balances—[Supreme Court](#), Congress, president. Executive, legislative, judicial. All equal branches. All checking each other and balancing each other, based on a system of federalism, that each state would have the right to be autonomous and free, as long as it did not contradict or conflict with the laws of the union itself. And they solve that problem of the Articles of Confederation.

And this system, 249 years ago, whether it persevered—I don't know how it persevered in the Revolutionary War. The Americans didn't have a lot of assets. The French helped a great deal. But then we had the War of 1812. The War of 1848. And of course, the American Civil War, where 700,000 Americans died trying to abolish slavery, and some trying to perpetuate it. And then, of course, we had the Spanish-American War. And then World War I, where 117,000 Americans died. Two million of them went across the Atlantic Ocean to save France and Britain from German precisionism or German autocracy.

And yet, less than 22 years later, the United States would be

in another world war, and we would lose about 420,000. And then the Korean War, 1950 to 1953—35,000. Fifty-six thousand in Vietnam.

So, it's very valuable on this date, to realize that from time to time, from generation to generation, thousands of Americans have fought to protect the ideas of the American Revolution and the United States itself.

And on this July 4th, we need to give them a due. And remember what they did, who they were, and why they did it.

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