Independence Day Honors Lofty Concept, Hard-Won Reality

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COMMENTARY

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If we can silence the fireworks and put down our beers for a moment, we might stop to appreciate what it is we are celebrating on Independence Day. At a minimum, of course, we know that we are celebrating our independence from Great Britain. But in the back of our minds, we also know that our independence stands for something more.

After a while, we will start to remember (thanks to our grade-school teachers) that America's independence has a special resonance for people everywhere — recall the "shot heard 'round the world" — because it stands for the radical idea that governments exist only by the consent of the governed. The Declaration of Independence explained for all to hear that when any government fails to act in the best interests of its people (as Britain did), the people can abolish the government and create a new one (as we did by creating our own country).

But why, you might ask, should people have the right to choose their own government? Chickens, after all, did not pick Frank Perdue to rule the roost, and the leader of a wolf pack is the most confident wolf, not the one elected by the pack members. Why then, should it be any different for people (recognizing, sadly, that in many countries it is not)?

The reason is that our nation was founded upon the belief that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. That's what Thomas Jefferson meant when he wrote that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson believed that governments were created to "secure these rights," and if any government became "destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."

Yet if Independence Day is not only about declaring independence but also about respecting human dignity, it becomes apparent that declaring independence was merely an opening act to a greater venture: the creation of a society founded upon human dignity.

Indeed, Independence Day is in many ways an exuberant prelude to the self-reflective Constitution Day, a new national observance Sept. 17, the date the framers signed the Constitution in Philadelphia in 1787. For it was in the Constitution that we started to fulfill our commitment to human dignity by making it difficult for ourselves to become oppressors.

After all, what distinguishes the Constitution from ordinary laws is that it is very difficult to change — just ask the senators who recently failed to pass a flag-burning amendment. What this has meant, at least over time, is that even "We the People" cannot easily take away those rights that are at the core of human dignity: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, protection against unreasonable searches, due process and equal protection of the law.

Of course, fulfilling our commitment to honor human dignity is not something that happened instantaneously with the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the adoption of the Constitution. It still took a civil war to rid us of the scourge of slavery and another century to end a system of segregation. Indeed, we have not now, nor will we ever, fully achieve this goal. Instead, the goal of creating a society based upon human dignity is something we must always be striving for.

Our commitment to individual dignity also does not imply that we will always agree on what this commitment entails. We may forever debate how to balance a woman's right to control her body against a fetus' right to life, or how to weigh our compelling interest in national security against our equally compelling interest in protecting civil liberties.

What is vital, however, is that this debate occurs against a backdrop of our commitment to human rights. That's what we fought for in 1776, and that's what we continue to strive for in 2006. Fortunately, at least, that is something worth celebrating on Independence Day. That is, of course, along with the fireworks and beer.

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