

Independence Day, 2003

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Today is the 227th anniversary of the day when Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and the 53 other members of the Continental Congress wrote these sacred words. Two hundred twenty-seven years since this band of brothers mutually pledged to each other their Lives, their Fortunes and their sacred Honor.

I've thought a lot about these words since Mr. Welch introduced them to me in the fourth grade, more than 50 years ago. The concepts embodied in our Declaration of Independence sparked a nation, a nation that Lincoln was to describe some "four score and seven years" later as "*a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*"

This is why we celebrate America today. This is why we stand tall and proud, we who have the privilege of living in the magnificent after-glow from that great spark of freedom.

Happy Birthday, America.

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What I didn't learn until I had been out of Mr. Welch's classroom for some few years was that some of us weren't free, that some of us had no say in how we were governed, that, indeed, the Government, through its legal authority, was actively interfering in the safety and happiness of the governed.

What I didn't learn until after I left Mr. Welch's classroom was that there was a wide gap between America's ideals and America's reality, that there was a contradictory part of America, something that had been with us since the first Europeans landed on America's shore. "*We the people*" didn't really mean "*we the people.*"

It didn't mean the native-Americans whose ancestors had discovered America 15,000 years before Columbus. It didn't mean the slaves, stolen from their homes in Africa. And it didn't mean women, who were legally barred from providing their consent. It did include gays, but only if they stayed in the closet.

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Part of the glory of America ... part of what we celebrate on July 4th is America's continuing ability to recognize and narrow the gap between "*We the people*" and "*we the people*," our ability to alter and abolish old forms of government, replacing them with forms that seem most likely to effect the safety and happiness of *all* the people.

We fought a Civil War that ended slavery in America, fighting another war a century later to break down the walls of segregation. Women earned the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment. Barriers to the participation of women, African-Americans, native-Americans, and other 'historically discriminated groups' in the American Dream have shrunk, and they continue to shrink, albeit at far too slow a pace.

America continues to close the gap between our ideals and our realities. But even as we close the gap, there is so much more that needs to be done.

We are still far from the Promised Land ... when America lives Martin Luther King's dream "... *that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*"

Independence Day is a day to celebrate our freedom ... and it is a day for us to rededicate ourselves to the great cause of freedom.

Rita and I went to the Hollywood Bowl last night to hear an "American concert." One of the songs we sang was *America the Beautiful*. Words from that song have been with me all day ...

To crown thy good with brotherhood.

Happy birthday, America.

Let Freedom Ring.