

After centuries of struggle, blessings of liberty still imperfectly distributed

John Burbank; News Tribune Columnist

It was 138 years ago yesterday that the Union army won the Battle of Gettysburg, turning the tide of the Civil War. So on Independence Day of 1863, Americans could hope that the Union would persevere and prosper.

About once a year my job takes me to Washington, D.C. During every visit I always take time to walk over to the Lincoln Memorial. I read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address carved on one wall, and the Second Inaugural Address carved on the other. Every time I am awed by the statue of Lincoln and search his eyes, his face, his whole being carved in stone.

In many ways, Lincoln, more so than Washington, Jefferson and Adams, was the father of our country. We would not be a country of free men and women without the abolition of slavery. Indeed, we would not be a country of the 50 states without the Union prevailing in the Civil War. We would not be, in the words of Lincoln, a "government of the people, by the people, for the people. ..." We would not be the United States of America.

A good starting point for the story of our independence is the Boston Massacre of 1770, when occupying British soldiers fired on a crowd of protesters. The first American killed was Crispus Attucks, a fugitive slave who had escaped from his master and had worked for 20 years as a merchant seaman.

But the American Revolution was an incomplete struggle, signifying liberty but leaving the vast majority of black Americans in slavery. It took 95 more years before the Union victories in the Civil War annihilated slavery. We tend to forget that 10 percent of the union armies, about 200,000 men, were black Americans who understood the Civil War as a war of liberation. We also tend to forget that just 40 years ago, segregation was the law and 30 years ago it was still viable. Segregation ended only when courageous women and men of all races, risking jail, beatings and even death, joined together in the civil rights movement.

We still have a long way to go on the path to full equality. Just remember Florida last November, where, by random chance or malicious mischief, African Americans were turned away from voting by the thousands.

Closer to home, why is it that at Tacoma's Lincoln High School, where blacks, Asians, Hispanics and American Indians predominate and where a majority of students were born into low-income families, only 32 percent even take the college entrance exam? Has the nasty debate that surrounded affirmative action unwittingly told our minority students that they are not welcome at college and need not apply? Is this door to the middle class closed to them?

But let's also consider the taxi drivers I had the chance to talk with on my last two business trips. One was a black man from Jamaica and the other a black man from Ghana. Both of them have children who are now in college and who are emblematic of the American dream.

These men came to this country with nothing. They worked hard, their children went to public schools and public universities, and they have, in many ways and in their own eyes, made it. These men are patriotic packages of hope, opportunity and hard work in America. In our country of first-, second-, third-, fourth- and

10th-generation immigrants, they show that our country is still the beacon for the "tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

It is a good thing to think about on Independence Day. As patriotic Americans, we can reflect on the opening assertion of human rights in the Declaration of Independence: "All Men are created equal."

It is our Constitution that acknowledges not only our rights but also our responsibility to "promote the general welfare ... and secure the blessings of liberty ..."

Our present task is to create the opportunities of work and education so that all Americans can realize our founding fathers' words "that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Then truly each one of us can say, "Yes, I am an American."


Happy Fourth of July 2001.

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