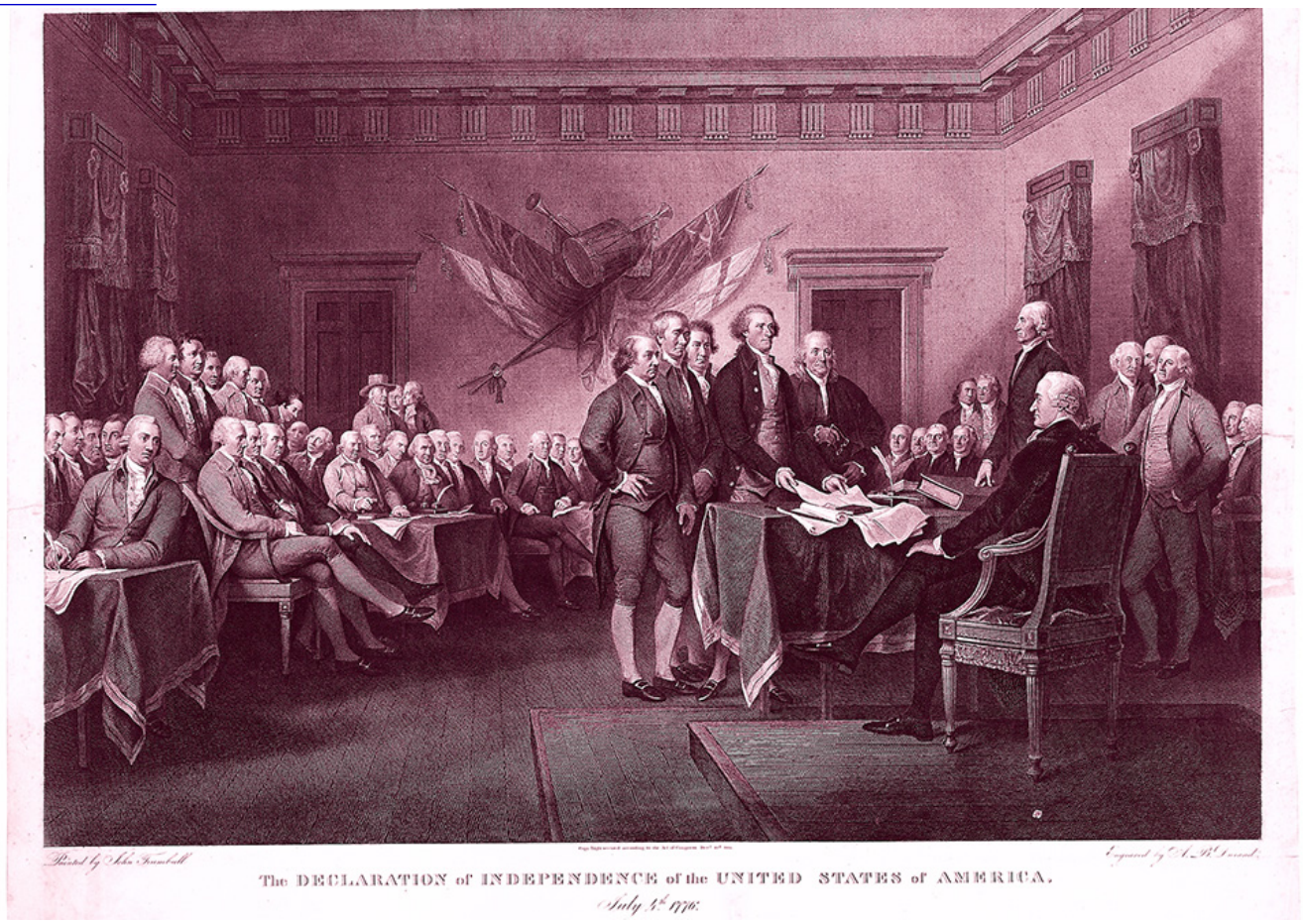
Opinion
NCR Voices



"The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776," an 1823 engraving by Asher Brown Durand after original painting by John Trumbull (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Next year, we can expect all manner of festivities on July 4, marking the semiquincentennial, or 250th anniversary, of the American Declaration of Independence. This year, however, we have time to think about what it is we are celebrating.

Last weekend, I rewatched Ken Burns' 1997 documentary on "Thomas Jefferson." It celebrated his achievements while also addressing his failings. It captured the degree to which Jefferson remains an enigma. How could the man whose words and life celebrated the possibilities of human freedom, and its God-given quality, fail to disassociate himself from the greatest affront to that freedom, slavery? All these years later, there is no good answer to that question.

When the leaders of the civil rights movement spoke, they spoke first and foremost in the words of Sacred Scripture but secondly in the words Jefferson himself had penned in the Declaration of Independence. And let us always demonstrate sufficient humility to admit that if we had been born on a Virginia plantation when Jefferson had been born on such a plantation, and if we think we would have seen how to end slavery as he did not, we think very highly of ourselves.

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We have come to recognize that the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," which blended so nicely in abstract form upon the page, do not cohere so neatly in real life. Liberty tends to breed inequality. Some people's pursuit of happiness entails robbing others of their freedom or even their life. Still, it is the proposition that holds us together as Abraham Lincoln understood when he delivered the Gettysburg Address.

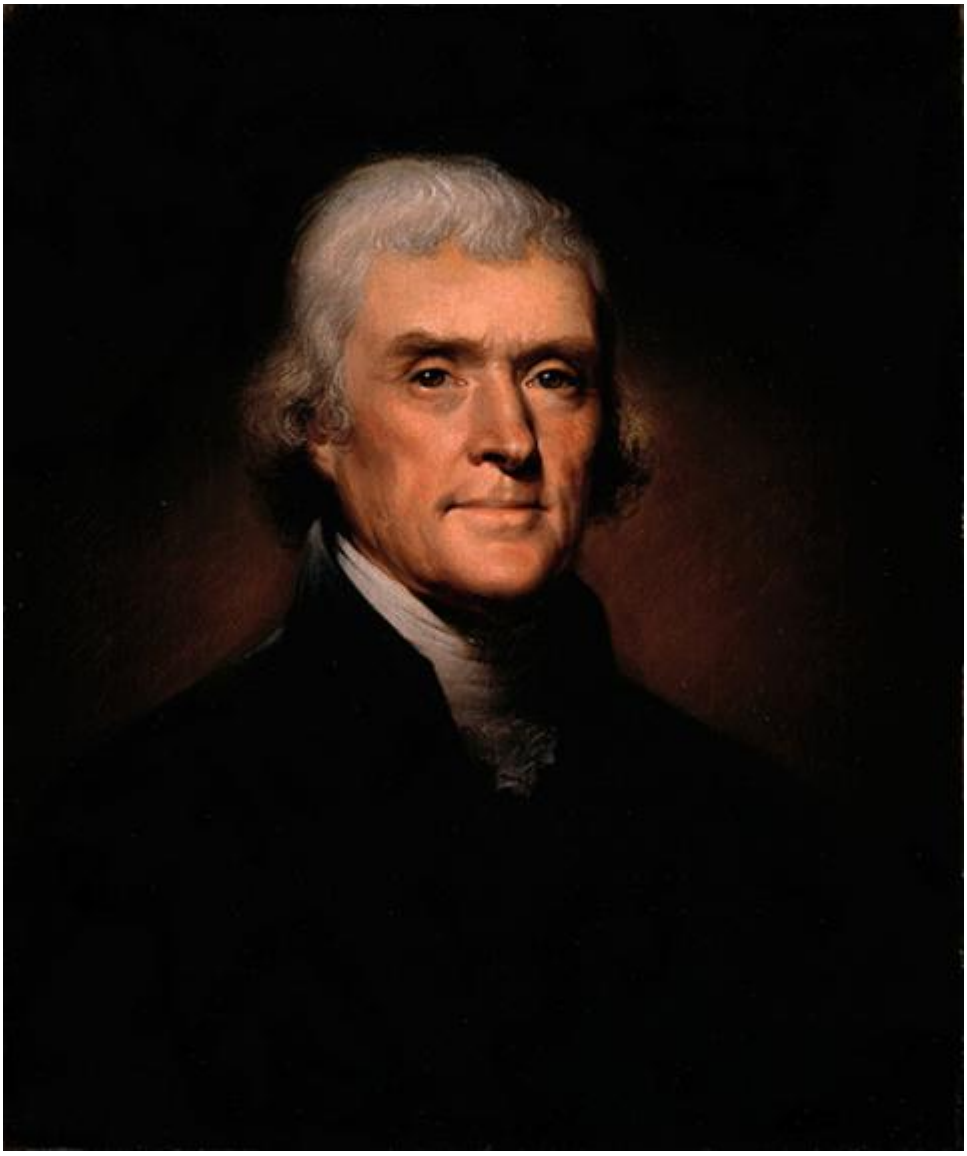
The nation's ability to adhere to Jefferson's grand vision has been as uneven as his own but, mostly, our history has been marked by a deepening commitment to democracy and human freedom.

Today, however, many of us feel that our history is at a turning point, that democracy has been corrupted and authoritarian impulses are in the ascendant. Jefferson's Enlightenment sensibility is no longer challenged by John Adams' pessimism about the human condition. Instead, Jefferson's Enlightenment ideals are challenged by earlier, more primal, brutish forces we thought had been overcome and superseded by our national experiment in freedom.

Watching the documentary, while many controversial topics were addressed, some things were presented as unquestioned and unquestionable. George Will discusses the Jeffersonian creed in forging American identity:

> He gave us our creed. … Our [identity] is rooted in a great assent, an assent to certain propositions. We are, as Lincoln said, Lincoln being the greatest student of Jefferson of them all, we are dedicated to a proposition. Jefferson wrote the proposition. … Want to become an American? Here is what you believe. No one knows how to become French. No one knows where Germany comes from, it sort of emerges from the mists. We know when we started, we know the afternoon: July 4, 1776. And we know how to become an American. You come here and you assent. Then you're an American, just as American as anybody whose family has been here for ten generations. You're in. You're it. That's what an American is.

Is that true anymore? I believed it every year I worked in the restaurant business, an industry with many immigrants, celebrating with them as they became citizens. I believe it still. But, have we as a country lost this noble and once universally accepted understanding of what it means to be an American? Will we ever get it back?



A portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Rembrandt Peale (Artvee)

In a trenchant essay at Unpopular Front, John Ganz calls the effort to redefine citizenship the "essence of Trump's movement." Ganz states, " 'MAGA,' in its innermost being, means 'death to America.' If they successfully destroy American citizenship as enshrined in the Constitution they will have destroyed the country. We will be, all of a sudden, somewhere else. It may be called the United States of America, but it really won't be."

In response to the Department of Justice's plans to denaturalize citizens convicted of a crime, Ganz points to Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in *Trop* v. *Dulles*, which held that stripping a naturalized citizen of his citizenship violated the Eighth amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Warren wrote: "There may be involved no physical mistreatment, no primitive torture. There is, instead, the total destruction of the individual's status in organized society. It is a form of punishment more primitive than torture, for it destroys for the individual the political existence that was centuries in the development."

Documentaries only get you so far, even when they are well done. So, in the year ahead, I intend to dust off some good biographies of those who voted for independence in Philadelphia 249 years ago. Most especially, I want to re-read the correspondence between Jefferson and Adams in their later years, after their political fights, as they sought to explain themselves to each other.

This time next year, I hope all Americans will find it within themselves to rededicate ourselves to those ideals our founders set forth, aware that we will never achieve them as we should, but also that they remain ideals worthy of our pursuit.