

A meditation on Independence Day

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LEE'S SUMMIT, Mo.—For me the days leading up to Independence Day are thoughtful ones. The sobering reality of troops in harm's way and cells of violence here at home should lead us to revisit our priorities. With our nation's history in mind, it is fitting to recall where we are and where we came from.

First president

The generations before us sacrificed their blood and sweat to ensure today's blessings of liberty. George Washington on his first inaugural made clear his conviction that the hand of Providence was guiding a people whose destiny was greatness.

Said Washington: "It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations . . . that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United states . . . No people can be bound to acknowledge the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency" (quoted in *By These Words*, by Paul M. Angle, pages 128-129).

First Congress

The First Congress issued this resolution shortly after it convened.

"Resolved, That a Joint Committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States, to request that he would recommend to the People of the United States a day of Thanksgiving and Prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favours of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peacefully to establish a Constitution of Government for their safety and happiness" (Annals of Congress, Sept. 25, 1789).

First chief justice

And John Jay, the first chief justice of the third branch of government, the Supreme Court, wrote: "I have long been of the opinion that the evidence of the truth of Christianity requires only to be carefully examined to produce

conviction in candid mines . . ." (John Jay, in a letter to the Rev. Uzal Ogden, Feb. 14, 1796).

Many years later, in an address to the American Bible Society, Justice May remarked: "The same merciful Providence has also been pleased to cause every material event and occurrence respecting our Redeemer, together with the gospel he proclaimed, and the miracles and predictions to which it gave occasion, to be faithfully recorded and preserved for the information and benefit of all mankind" (John Jay, in an address to the American Bible Society, May 9, 1822).

Based on Isaiah

Because so many of the founders had a vision of the nation based on Higher Power, they built a constitutional republic rooted in both English Common Law and biblical precepts. Even the concept of three coequal branches of government is based on a passage tucked away in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

"For the LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King" (Isaiah 33:22, NKJV).

Here we have the judicial, legislative and executive branches of government rolled into one neat package headed by the Sovereign of the universe. But the framers of the Constitution were savvy enough to know that only God is wise enough and trustworthy enough to wield the power of all three branches. That's why they divided the government and gave the three branches countervailing powers. Though frustratingly restrictive, that construct over the centuries has saved us a lot of grief.

And it should give us pause when we review the words and convictions of the first president, the first chief justice of the Supreme Court and the first Congress. These men were witnesses and participants in the birth of a nation. They fought for its independence, they framed its Constitution, and supported its Bill of Rights.

Sovereignty of God

In assuming the mantle of power, all three branches of their first convening under that constitution acknowledged the sovereignty of Almighty God over their affairs.

While many have been led to believe that most of the founding fathers were Deists (I was taught that bit of misinformation over 35 years ago), from their own statements it is clear that very few fell into that category. They knew who the true Judge, the true Chief Executive and the true Lawgiver is, and humbly accepted the temporary charge given them to establish a more perfect union and promote the general welfare.

They taught us the lesson that a little humility goes a long way on the road to greatness.