

## Reflections on Independence Day

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Last month, I toured Independence Hall in Philadelphia. As I stood in the room where the Declaration of Independence was signed, the tour guide quoted the words of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826):

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”*

In a rented room not far from that spot, Thomas Jefferson wrote the creed that Americans have been attempting to live up to ever since.

And yet the very man who wrote those words owned slaves, harbored views of the inferiority of their intelligence<sup>1</sup>, and fathered six children by one of them. Jefferson was blind to his transgressions against the words that he wrote, understanding his slaves to be property, non-persons to do with as he wished. At the end of his life he preferred to live the life of a genteel plantation owner and rack up indebtedness, not working to free them as George Washington and other founding fathers had. I had the chance to reflect on these things as I visited Monticello, the home of Jefferson, also last month.

The tour guide at Independence Hall intimated that the history of our country is the expanse of our collective understanding of these words.

While we are thankful that personhood has been granted to African Americans (yet not without a great war of incredible bloodshed), we should consider the need to expand this understanding also to unborn children. While the record of our early founding is not perfect on the topic of abortion (during times of difficulty people do terrible things), neither was it perfect for issues like rights for African Americans (we can do better). While abortions and infanticide did take place before and after 1776, and while there were not always strong laws preventing such (such laws were tightened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>2</sup> we now have collectively removed the understanding of personhood from the littlest of American citizens, of all races and ethnicities, feeling that we can treat them as no better than non-persons, our property to be discarded or kept, as we may wish.

The fifty-six representatives of the Second Continental Congress signed their name to the following words on July 4, 1776, *“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*

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*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.”* (Note that the founding fathers recognized that without Life, there is no Liberty or pursuit of Happiness!)

These words ring to what we ascribe to as a nation and country, not what we always have been or presently are. It is our task to carry these ideals forward and ask ourselves, is our nation progressing towards these ends or regressing from them?

We see grave errors and terrible blindness in our present leaders even as we do in our founding father Thomas Jefferson, but we do not lose heart.

*So shall our prayers arise  
To God above the skies;  
On Him we wait.  
Thou who art ever nigh,  
Guarding with watchful eye,  
To Thee aloud we cry:  
God save the state!<sup>3</sup>*

#### Notes:

1. For his views on the differences between African Americans and Caucasians, see Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832), pp. 144-151. Book available at [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Notes\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_of\\_Virginia/FIEVAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Notes_on_the_State_of_Virginia/FIEVAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover) (accessed 25 June, 2023)
2. See for example Dennis Di Mauro, *A Love for Life: Christianity's Consistent Protection of the Unborn* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008) pp. 27-32. Also, Marvin Olasky, "Did Colonial America have abortions? Yes, but..." in *World*, January 17, 2015, available at <https://wng.org/sift/did-colonial-america-have-abortions-yes-but-1617409251> (accessed 25 June, 2023).
3. LSB 965.2; the text of the hymn is in the public domain