

## **The Declaration of Independence: “The Last Best Hope on Earth”**

*July Fourth is much more than just an American holiday*

William J. Bennett & John Craig, *The Wall Street Journal* online, July 3, 2009.

“I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” This statement from Abraham Lincoln in Philadelphia in 1861 was no staff-manufactured line. It was an expression from a man filled with deep emotion at finding himself standing in the hall where a courageous band of rebels pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to a high and dangerous purpose — American independence. We celebrate them on July Fourth.

Lincoln revered the Declaration of and its ideals of liberty and equality. In an 1858 speech in Chicago, he said it was “the father of all moral principle” in the American republic, and its spirit “the electric cord... that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together.”

he spent much time pondering the hardships endured by those who had fought for independence. In that speech he called them “iron men.” As a boy, he read accounts of the patriots’ battlefield struggles in Parson Weems’s “Life of Washington” and thought, as he told the New Jersey state Senate in 1861, that “there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for.”

Yet in Lincoln’s time, the Declaration and its spirit was under attack. Proponents of slavery insisted that the Founders did not intend for the God-given right to liberty in the Declaration to apply to all people. The notion that “all men are created equal” was belittled by John C. Calhoun in 1848 as “the most false and dangerous of all political error.”

The Declaration had its detractors abroad as well. Across Europe, members of privileged classes sneered at the thought of people ruling themselves. Many a nobleman viewed the Civil War as proof that the American democratic experiment would fail.

British statesman John Bright took them to task: “Privilege thinks it has a great interest in this contest, and every morning, with blatant voice, it... curses the American Republic. Privilege has beheld an afflicting spectacle for many years past. It has beheld thirty millions of men, happy and prosperous, without emperor, without king...Privilege has shuddered at what might

happen to old Europe if this grand experiment should succeed.

Lincoln understood that if the American experiment of self-government were to succeed, the country must be saved on the basis of the Declaration of Independence. It was no accident that in the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address, he quoted the Declaration, reminding Americans that from the beginning the nation had been dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Lincoln also understood that the struggle over the declaration was part of an eternal struggle between two principles at the basis of all government. “They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle, : as he put it in one of his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas. “The one is the common right of humanity and the other the diving right of kings.”

The struggle continues today. Terrorists and dictators hate the United States for its founding principles. They prefer to rob people of liberty, subjugate women, and spread their power by the sword. Yet America still has iron men and women who stand up to such tyrants. These iron men are now fighting on battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Declaration of Independence is not a legal document in the same sense as the Constitution. No one talks about a law being “undeclarational,” or opines about their “declarational rights.” yet it remains the first and in some ways most universal of our great founding documents. As Lincoln said in Philadelphia in February 1861, there is “something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country , but hope to the world for all future time.”

As long as the United States stands fast for the moral principles of July 4, 1776, we will continue to be the bulwark of freedom, the last best hope of earth.