

The contemporary significance of the Declaration of Independence and the Battle of Gettysburg

Joseph Kishore
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This week marks the anniversary of two great events in American and world history: the Declaration of Independence and the Civil War Battle of Gettysburg.

The Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, was adopted by the Continental Congress 237 years ago this Thursday, on July 4, 1776. Expressing the advanced political thought of the Enlightenment, the Declaration proclaimed as “self-evident” the “truths”—bitterly opposed by the rulers of the day—that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “unalienable Rights” to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The Declaration did not end there. It proclaimed that “[W]hensoever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

To the British government in London, the Declaration was illegal and treasonous. If King George had been able to capture the signers of the Declaration, they would have been transported back to England and hanged. But the revolution succeeded, and history honors those who inspired, led and fought for it arms in hand.

Eighty-seven years after the signing of the Declaration, and 150 years ago today, the Battle of Gettysburg began, lasting from July 1 to July 3, 1863. The conflict in the southern Pennsylvania town, only 80 miles north of the nation’s capital, was one of the monumental struggles between the Union and Confederate armies, leaving 35,000 soldiers killed or wounded. The great historical issue that underlay the conflict was the destruction of slavery. After a three-day battle, in blazing summer heat, the soldiers of the Union emerged victorious.

The Battle of Gettysburg did not end the Civil War, which would continue for two more years. It was, however, a turning point in the struggle against slavery in the United States. Coming six months after Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect, the battle turned back General Robert E. Lee’s northern invasion, a defeat from which the South would never recover.

In his speech four months later dedicating the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Lincoln drew the connection between the Declaration of Independence and the Civil War. “Four score and seven years ago,” Lincoln began, “our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Those who sacrificed their lives at Gettysburg—what Lincoln described as “the last full measure of devotion”—had done so to ensure that “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Historically speaking, these events belong to the epoch of bourgeois democratic revolutions in the United States and internationally. Yet the principles embodied in them have a broader, universal significance. The bourgeois democratic revolutions were the precursors to the great social revolutions. The American Civil War, in the words of Marx, “sounded the tocsin” for the future struggles of the international working class.

How stark is the contrast between the principles advanced in these revolutions and the actions of the American government today! Predictably, Obama has said virtually nothing about the 150th Anniversary of Gettysburg. While the celebrations this week will attract hundreds of thousands of people, the media has given scant attention to them.

And what could they say? How can they evoke the

traditions of the Civil War and the Revolution without exposing their own hypocrisy?

The list of usurpations that served as the indictment of King George III pale in comparison to the actions of the American government today. Under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terror,” the rights embodied in the Bill of Rights—freedom of speech and the press, the prohibition of unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to due process and a jury trial, protection against self-incrimination, the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment—are being systematically eviscerated.

The growth of executive power has gone beyond what King George himself would have imagined, with the president asserting the right to assassinate anyone, including US citizens, without due process.

The US government is engaged in a vicious campaign to seize and prosecute the young whistleblower Edward Snowden. Snowden’s “crime,” for which he too has been declared a “traitor,” is to reveal to the American people an illegal spying operation of incredible scope, in which the government is collecting and monitoring every email and phone call, every web site visited, every Facebook chat and Skype call of everyone in the United States and a good portion of the rest of humanity.

In the United States, Bradley Manning is being tried before a court martial for exposing the crimes of the American military. And in Britain, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been forced to seek refuge in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, where he has spent the past year.

The political structure of the country is being transformed. In April, Boston—the cradle of the American Revolution—was shut down and placed under virtual martial law in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings. In June, an individual who apparently had important information about the two suspects in the bombing was shot dead by the FBI during interrogation. No credible explanation has been given for his killing.

Every official institution is infected with the disease of dictatorship. The Supreme Court last week observed in its own peculiar way the anniversary of Gettysburg by overturning the key provision of the Voting Rights Act, the major piece of democratic legislation to come out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In so doing, the Court implicitly attacked the 15th Amendment to the US Constitution, enacted in 1870 and empowering Congress to prevent any state from infringing on the right of people to vote on account of their race or color.

Congress, dominated by multimillionaires, functions as

a facilitator and co-conspirator in the destruction of democracy. The pundits, columnists and newspaper editors of the establishment media direct their venom not at the government, but at those who seek to expose government criminality.

The political front men of the modern-day financial aristocracy defend a government not “of the people, by the people, for the people,” but “of the rich, by the rich, for the rich.” The financial speculators and corporate executives have built up fortunes on an unimaginable scale while society as a whole has undergone a terrible retrogression. They hate and fear the population.

The traditions of the American revolutions are deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people. The memory of the Founders and, above all, Abraham Lincoln evokes respect and reverence. The tens of thousands who are visiting Gettysburg this week prove that Lincoln was right when he predicted that the people “will never forget what they [the soldiers] did here.”

Despite all the efforts of the media and political establishment to pollute public consciousness, the great historical struggles have not been eradicated from the consciousness of the people—neither in the United States nor around the world.

The American and international working class are the true heirs of the ideals and traditions of 1776 and 1863. The defense of democracy again assumes a revolutionary character, but under very different conditions. To halt and reverse the drive toward dictatorship, a movement must be built in the working class, a movement that begins with the understanding that democracy is incompatible with capitalism, and that true freedom must be rooted in social equality. All that was progressive in the history of the United States can be carried forward only through a revolutionary struggle for socialism.



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