

America on the Fourth of July: From Thomas Jefferson to Donald Trump

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The Fourth of July marks the anniversary—242 years ago—when the Congress representing thirteen colonies on the Eastern seaboard of the North American continent voted unanimously to declare independence from Great Britain and the British Crown. The Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, remains one of the great revolutionary documents.

Marxists are well aware of the historical limitations within which the Founding Fathers operated. They were men of the new bourgeois world, just emerging from centuries of feudal despotism and religious obscurantism. Nothing, however, is more contemptible than the postmodernist deconstruction of history by contemporary middle-class identity politics, which is itself based on a repudiation of the Enlightenment conceptions summed up in the declaration that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Any reading of the document today stands as a condemnation of the ruling class that presides over American society. Every basic right enumerated in it is openly flouted. The elementary principle of due process is a dead letter. The Fourth of July is being marked under conditions of the mass roundup of immigrants, openly fascist declarations from President Trump, and the construction of modern-day concentration camps.

It is worth noting, in the aftermath of the June 30 protests against Trump’s persecution of immigrants, that one of the wrongs alleged against King George in the Declaration of Independence was his effort to prevent immigration to the 13 colonies by “obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners” and “refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither.”

Many other passages in that declaration are equally relevant to 2018:

“He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.”

Trump has placed military officers in top positions in his administration, passed (with the support of the Democratic Party) a record military budget at the expense of social services, and announced plans for an unprecedented military parade through Washington DC. While Trump develops his fascist politics, the Democrats uphold the criminals in the military-intelligence apparatus as the great representatives of democracy.

“For protecting them [British troops], by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these States.”

While King George gave impunity to British troops who opened fire on civilians, the entire political establishment does the same for uniformed police, who now kill more than 1,000 civilians a year in the United States. The Trump administration has shut down even the most toothless oversight into police killings and denounced any efforts to hold the police accountable for such crimes.

“For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury.”

Trump has called for the elimination of any access to the court system for immigrants seized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or the Border Patrol, declaring that they should be thrown out of the country without going before any judge, let alone a jury. Under Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama, the American president declared his right to kill any individual on the planet, using drone-fired cruise missiles, without reference to international law or due process.

“In every stage of these Oppressions We have

Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.”

More people have demonstrated against the policies of the Trump administration over the past 18 months than have taken to the streets in the previous 30 years. The White House ignores the protests and pushes ahead with its right-wing rampage, secure in the knowledge that the Democrats will do nothing about it.

In its revolutionary heyday, the American bourgeoisie was able to put forward political leaders of enormous ability, courage and political foresight, from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln. One hallmark of the historical decay of American capitalism is the downward arc of those the ruling elite selects as its leading personnel, culminating in the grotesque figure of Donald Trump, billionaire con man, real estate swindler and star of “reality television.”

Leon Trotsky once observed that Nazism degraded political thought to the level of “the dog’s bark and the pig’s grunt.” Trump’s twitter boasts and insults do the same, in the era of social media.

The Trump administration, however, is the expression of an underlying social disease, of which his opponents within the ruling class are another expression. His Democratic opponents confine themselves to portraying the mounting social opposition to American capitalism as the product of Russian efforts at “sowing divisions.” As though American society would be a Garden of Eden without the supposed interference of Moscow!

James P. Cannon, the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, once wrote that socialists should celebrate the Fourth of July because the American revolutionaries “started something that opened up a new era of promise for all mankind... But nobody can sell me the Fourth of July speeches which represent the start as the finish and the promise as the fulfillment.”

The great events of 1776 were the start of many things. They inspired the French Revolution of 1789, and the great upheavals of the 19th century—not least America’s “Second Revolution” in the Civil War, which destroyed chattel slavery and freed millions. But the establishment of formal democracy and equality before the law did not bring “fulfillment,” in Cannon’s terms, i.e., genuine social equality and genuine democracy. That was impossible in a society based upon capitalist property relations.

Today the contradiction between the democratic promise of the American Revolution and the reality of American capitalism, riven by social inequality on an unprecedented scale, has reached the breaking point. The government is a monstrous machinery of repression, a military-intelligence apparatus that is itself the greatest threat to the democratic rights of working people.

The only class in American society capable of defending any of the democratic ideals of the American Revolution is the working class. The fight to defend these rights—and to oppose social inequality, end the persecution of immigrants, and halt the drive to world war—inevitably brings the working class into conflict with the dictatorship of the financial oligarchy and the capitalist system over which it presides.

Inevitably ignored in every marking of the Fourth of July by the media and political establishment is the fundamental principle contained in the Declaration of Independence that when any form of government becomes destructive of the rights of the people, “it is the 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.”

That is a right that this generation of American workers, and the working class throughout the world, will be compelled to exercise.



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