



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 4, 2018

What Is the Fourth of July Really About?

On the Blaze this week, a reporter went to the beach and asked several people there a simple question: “Why do we celebrate the Fourth of July?”

Many had no idea, with answers that ranged from “I forgot,” to “I don’t really know.” Others were defiant: “I’m not a history person.” One person thought it had something to do with the end of the Civil War, or perhaps the end of slavery. Finally, someone was sure it was when “Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”



Others, of course, realized that July 4, 1776 marked the independence of the United States — after all, it’s official name is “Independence Day.”

But with all the fireworks and barbecues, the deeper meaning of the day can be lost. Yes, it is the day that the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, a written statement in the words of its principal author, Thomas Jefferson, that was produced out of “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” to “declare the causes which impel them [the states] to the separation.”

First of all, Jefferson wanted to justify the right of the 13 British colonies to secede from the British Empire. To do so, he drew heavily upon the work of John Locke, whose treatise on civil government was used to justify the right of Parliament to basically fire King James II in 1688, in what is known as the Glorious Revolution. Locke said that the purpose of government was to protect each person’s right to life, liberty, and property. Government did not give anyone rights. Certain rights were natural, given to each person by God Himself.

“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,” is the way Jefferson penned it. He listed three rights as “among” those God gives us — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson was not declaring that property [the principal right for Locke, who explained that it all comes down to property because we own our life and our liberty, just as much as we own our material possessions] was not an unalienable right, but rather he was expanding the right. Jefferson, who owned a plantation, certainly believed in the right of property, both material and personal. What he wished to do was say that each person had a right to pursue happiness in whatever way each person so desired. Jefferson said only that a person had a right to *pursue* happiness, not that it was in any way the role of government to *provide* happiness.

So, what is government’s purpose? It is to “secure these rights.” At this point, it is imperative that we examine closely what Jefferson wrote: “That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Reading this closely we learn that Jefferson, and the 55 other men who approved the Declaration, believed two prerequisites existed for a government to be legitimate. One, it must have the consent of the governed — those being ruled must



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consent to its rule. Many miss the second requirement, however. The powers that government exercises must be “just powers,” or powers exercised according to its purpose of protecting individual rights. The majority have no more right to infringe on one’s right to life, liberty, or property than an oligarchy or a king.

Neither Jefferson nor any other member of Congress was in any way proposing the creation of a “democracy.” Democracy simply means majority rule. Governments are not established — at least not “legitimate” governments in the view of the wording found in the Declaration of Independence — to ensure that the will of the majority prevails. A legitimate government, rather, is one that fulfills its purpose of protecting the rights of individuals. In other words, a republic.

Finally, the Congress gave its approval to Jefferson’s words justifying the secession of each state from the British Empire: “That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government.”

Some might dispute that the actual birthday of America was on July 2, 1776, when Congress adopted Richard Henry Lee’s resolution of independence. John Adams certainly thought so, for he advocated remembering that day — the second day of July — with bonfires and fireworks. But Americans quickly came to commemorate the fourth of July, the day that the Declaration of Independence was adopted, not the second. And, while we see lots of fireworks today, bonfires have never really caught on.

Ironically, the two men most associated with the Declaration of Independence died on the same day, 50 years to the day after the adoption of the Declaration. On July 4, 1826, two of the greatest of the Founding Fathers — Thomas Jefferson and John Adams — passed from this life.

But the fundamental belief of these two men distinguishes America from just about any other country: the belief that our liberties are not a gift from government, but rather from the hand of God Himself.

And that is what the Fourth of July is really about.

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