

The Declaration of Independence defines true meaning of freedom

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By MARK HILLMAN |

As we observe the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this Fourth of July, we should consider the unique form of government for which our Founding Fathers chose to risk "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" against the militarily superior British.

The definitive passage in the Declaration reads: "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 rights 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."

In these 57 words, the Founders established that:

- Our rights — better understood as "freedoms" — are given to us by a power higher than government. No matter what you believe about creation or evolution, you must acknowledge that government did not give us life.
- Government's legitimate purpose is to protect the rights of the people. Just as government did not give us life, it did not give us our rights.
- Government's legitimate powers are limited to only those given to it by the people.

"The whole point was to show how government might arise legitimately, not to assume its existence," writes constitutional scholar Roger Pilon in "The Purpose and Limits of Government" published by the Cato Institute.

Pilon's insights are particularly useful because, as a libertarian, he does not advance a religious conservative agenda. Yet he acknowledges that the Founders' common view of "the laws of Nature and Nature's God" provide the cornerstone for all that follows: We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .

The signers of the Declaration didn't negotiate and compromise to define truth. They agreed that certain fundamental truths were obvious. For example: ". . . that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In that each of us exists because of the same creative process, the rights to which each of us is entitled are necessarily equal. Such rights are best understood as freedom from interference, whether by government or by other people — which, of course, implies that others are entitled to be free from our interference.

Freedom encompasses not simply the opportunity to make choices but the responsibility for those choices. Freedom does not mean that, because my choice seems superior, I can bend others to my will through the power of government, nor does it mean that when I make an irresponsible choice I am immune from consequences.

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Once the Founders established a broad universe of rights, they discussed government, its sole purpose to protect those rights. Again it is imperative to understand "rights" as freedoms — not as an entitlement taken at the expense of another.

When government legitimately protects our freedom, it simply does that which we have a right to do ourselves. By contrast, government does not act legitimately if it secures my rights by taking the life, liberty or property of someone else.

When the rights of two people may conflict and neither can fully exercise freedom without adversely affecting the other, the Founders reasoned that in these circumstances, the boundaries between competing rights ought to be drawn by the people whom government serves. However, "consent of the governed" does not empower majority rule to deny freedom to the minority.

This concept — of a vast ocean of freedoms and tiny islands of government power — bears little resemblance to our federal government today, which is why it is so vitally important that we understand the foundation of our government before electing someone to lead it.

As Ronald Reagan warned, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free."

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