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What Silent Cal Said About the Fourth of July

The late president believed American freedom had religious roots.

By LEON KASS

Parades. Backyard barbecues. Fireworks. This is how many of us will celebrate the Fourth of July. In earlier times, the day was also marked with specially prepared orations celebrating our founding principles, a practice that has disappeared without notice.

It is a tribute to a polity dedicated to securing our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we can enjoy our freedoms while taking them for granted, giving little thought to what makes them possible. But this inattention comes at a heavy price, paid in increased civic ignorance and decreased national attachment—both dangerous for a self-governing people.

For an antidote to such thoughtlessness, one cannot do better than President Calvin Coolidge's remarkable address, delivered to mark the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1926. While he celebrated the authors of our founding document, Coolidge argued that it "represented the movement of a people . . . a great mass of independent, liberty-loving, God-fearing people who knew their rights, and possessed the courage to dare to maintain them."

History is replete with the births (and deaths) of nations. But the birth of the United States was unique because it was, and remains, a nation founded not on ties of blood, soil or ethnicity, but on ideas, held as self-evident truths: that all men are created equal; they are endowed with certain inalienable rights; and, therefore, the just powers of government, devised to safeguard those rights, must be derived from the consent of the governed.

What is the source of these ideas, and their singular combination in the Declaration? Many have credited European thinkers, both British and French. Coolidge, citing 17th- and 18th-century sermons and writings of colonial clergy, provides ample evidence that the principles of the Declaration, and especially equality, are of American cultural and religious provenance: "They preached equality because they believed in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. They justified freedom by the text that we are all created in the divine image, all partakers of the divine spirit." From this teaching flowed the emerging American rejection of monarchy and our bold embrace of democratic self-government.



Associated Press

Calvin Coolidge: 'If we are to maintain the great heritage which has been bequeathed to us, we must be like-minded as the fathers who created it.'

Coolidge draws conclusions from his search into the sources. First, the Declaration is a great spiritual document. "Equality, liberty, popular sovereignty, the rights of man . . . are ideals. They have their source and their roots in the religious convictions. . . . Unless the faith of the American people in these religious convictions is to endure, the principles of our Declaration will perish."

He also observes that the Declaration's principles are final, not to be discarded in the name of progress. To deny the truth of human equality, or inalienable rights, or government by consent is not to go forward but backward—away from self-government, from individual rights, from the belief in the equal dignity of every human being.

Coolidge's concluding remarks especially deserve our attention: "We live in an age of science and of abounding accumulation of material things. These did not create our Declaration. Our Declaration created them. The things of the spirit come first. . . . If we are to maintain the great heritage which has been bequeathed to us, we must be like-minded as the fathers who created it. We must not sink into a pagan materialism. We must cultivate the reverence which they had for the things which are holy. We must follow the spiritual and moral leadership which they showed. We must keep replenished, that they may glow with a more compelling flame, the altar fires before which they worshipped."

Coolidge was no religious fanatic. He appreciated our constitutional strictures against religious establishment and religious tests for office, limitations crucial to religious freedom and toleration, also principles unique to the American founding. But he understood that free institutions and economic prosperity rest on cultural grounds, which in turn rest on religious foundations.

Like Tocqueville, who attributed America's strength to its unique fusion of the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion, Coolidge is rightly concerned about what will happen to the sturdy tree of liberty should its cultural roots decay. It is a question worth some attention as we eat our barbecue and watch the fireworks.

Mr. Kass, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is a co-editor of "What So Proudly We Hail: The American Story in Soul, Speech and Song," published last month by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

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