

The Nationalist Myth and the Fourth of July

by Greg Loren Durand



Millions of Americans will soon gather in stadiums, parks, and other public venues across the country to celebrate a myth – one that has been carefully constructed over many years to elicit the highest levels of emotion and devotion, while just as carefully concealing the historical facts which undermine it. The myth: we commemorate the birth of our nation on the Fourth of July.

The truth is that there was no birth of an American nation on 4 July 1776. Instead, there was merely a joint declaration of independence of thirteen States from their former allegiance to the British Crown – an allegiance that each, while in their colonial condition, owed separately, not collectively, to the King via their individual charters. The official title of this declaration was “The unani-

mous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America." This was a shortened form of "The unanimous Declaration of Georgia, New York, Virginia, Massachusetts, *etc.*" According to the rules of English grammar, the lower case of the initial letter in the word "united" rendered it an adjective rather than a part of the proper noun which followed, thus identifying their association with each other as one of purpose, not of a political nature. Prior to 1781, the closest the several States had ever come to establishing a common political bond between themselves was the First Continental Congress, which met briefly in Philadelphia in 1774 and consisted of delegates from twelve of the colonies (Georgia was not represented), chosen to consider an economic boycott of British trade and to petition King George III for a redress of their grievances. The Second Continental Congress was simply a reconvening of the First, for the purpose of organizing a common defense of the colonies against British invasion and whose power was limited to issuing resolutions which had no legally binding authority whatsoever over the thirteen, either separately or jointly. In fact, the resolutions of the Congress and its requests for funding for the Continental Army were frequently ignored.

Another misconception that requires correc-

tion is that the independence of the States from Great Britain is legally dated from the signing of the Declaration on 4 July 1776. However, this is an inaccurate understanding of the purpose of that document, which was merely to serve as a notice and justification to the world of what had *already* transpired. For example, Virginia had declared its independence and adopted a State constitution on 29 June 1776, five days before the Declaration was signed. The people of each colony, separately and for themselves alone, determined that "as Free and Independent States," they should have "full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do." In other words, sovereignty had passed from the King to each new State separately, and not to the thirteen States as a collective body. Consequently the allegiance of each individual man, woman, and child was now owed to their own State as its Citizens rather than to the King as his subjects. This is how patriotism was understood at that time.

The thirteen States were again separately recognized as sovereign in the Articles of Confederation of 1781, in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, and again in the Constitution of 1787, particularly in the

Tenth Amendment. Calling to mind the former title of the Declaration of Independence, the original wording of the Preamble to the Constitution read, "We, the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia do ordain and establish this Constitution..." This wording was later shortened to read, "We the People of the United States," but the meaning remained the same: the Constitution was being "ordained and established" by distinct States, each acting for itself in its own sovereign capacity. This fact is clearly seen in Article VII, which states, "The ratification of the conventions of nine States, shall be sufficient for the establishment of this Constitution between the States so ratifying the same." In other words, the constitutional bond would exist only between those States ratifying it, therefore excluding the non-ratifying States from the political compact known as "The United States of America." As it turned out, two of the thirteen States – North Carolina and Rhode Island – did remain outside of the Union for many months and were treated by the newly-established Federal Government as foreign nations during that time.

It is noteworthy that the terms “nation” and “national” do not appear in the Constitution, except when referring to foreign nations. In fact, the term “federal” was deliberately chosen by the framers over “national” to describe the government created by the Constitution, thereby defining it as the offspring of the Union and the common agent of the ordaining sovereignties. The compacting States agreed to surrender certain enumerated powers to this common agent for the general welfare of all, while reserving to themselves the continued exercise of all other powers not so enumerated. One of the reserved rights of any sovereign when entering into a political compact with other sovereignties is that of withdrawal should the arrangement fail to answer to its purpose. We find this reserved right expressly stated in the ratifications of three of the original thirteen States – Virginia, New York, and Rhode Island – and accepted without question or objection from the other ten States. Declarations of sovereignty were also included in many of the State constitutions, such as that of Massachusetts, and the reserved right of secession was proclaimed numerous times throughout the first several decades following the ratification of the Constitution by both Northern and Southern States. Thus, it is beyond dispute that the United

States of America were legally a confederacy, not a nation, and were repeatedly described as such in the writings of the earliest political commentators.

The theory of a unitarian American nation was not popularized until Joseph Story, of Massachusetts, published his *Commentaries on the Constitution* in 1833. In this extensive work, Story argued that the “people of the United States” in the preamble of the Constitution referred to the “people in the aggregate,” rather than the people constituting several States, and that the States were therefore dependent upon the Union for their existence. Daniel Webster, also of Massachusetts, relied on this fallacy in his congressional debate with South Carolinian Senator John C. Calhoun that same year. Calhoun so soundly refuted this theory that it nearly completely vanished from the political scene, only to be resurrected nearly thirty years later by Abraham Lincoln in his first inaugural address on 4 March 1861, and again in his address to Congress on 4 July 1861. In the latter speech, Lincoln declared the absurdity that “the Union created the States,” rather than vice versa, and that therefore, secession by any State or States was tantamount to treason. He further expounded upon this theme in his celebrated Gettysburg address on 19 November 1863, wherein he dated the now-familiar idea of

the “nation’s birth” in 1776 and claimed that Northern soldiers had shed, and were shedding, their blood so that this imagined entity “would not perish from the earth.” Finally, during the Reconstruction period, the Republican radicals in Congress admitted that the war had been fought against the Southern States to overthrow “the pernicious heresy of State sovereignty,” and to consolidate forever the American people into a single nation under an all-powerful central Government.

Unreconstructed Southerners refused to observe the Fourth of July for several decades after the War Between the States because they saw it as a day of mourning rather than one of celebration. Not only had Lincoln chosen that day to deliver a virtual declaration of war against the founding principles of American constitutionalism, but it was also the anniversary of the fall of Vicksburg in the West (by which Lincoln’s Government gained control of the Mississippi River, effectively cutting the Southern Confederacy in half), and of the defeat of Robert E. Lee’s army at Gettysburg in the East (which marked the point of decline for Confederate military strength). Moreover, they saw the terrible irony of celebrating the independence of the original thirteen States from an oppressive cen-

tral government in 1776 when their own States had been so unjustly denied their independence and their people subjugated to an even greater tyranny than that from which their forefathers had fought to free themselves.

That there is an American nation today is obvious; in fact, it can be more accurately described as an empire. Not only does the central Government in Washington, D. C. claim ultimate sovereignty over the American people, but it also asserts the prerogative of controlling every aspect of their lives. In addition, it seeks to militarily impose its own ideas of democracy and freedom on other nations and people around the globe. However, the question remains: just when was this modern nation born, if not in 1776? One noted historian gave the answer:

[After the war] the old decentralized federal republic became a new national polity that taxed the people directly, created an internal revenue bureau to collect these taxes, expanded the jurisdiction of federal courts, established a national currency and a national banking structure. The United States went to war in 1861 to preserve the Union; it emerged from war in 1865 having created a nation. Before 1861 the two words "United States" were generally used as a plural

noun: "The United States are a republic." After 1865 the United States became a singular noun. The loose union of states became a nation.¹

Tyrants throughout history have understood that in order to keep a subjugated people under control, they must be cut off from their own history and provided with an alternate view of reality that is constantly reinforced through its symbols, ceremonies, and fabricated traditions. "[The conquered] must at least retain the semblance of the old forms," wrote Niccolo Machiavelli, the renowned political philosopher of the early Sixteenth Century, "so that it may seem to the people that there has been no change in the institutions, even though in fact they are entirely different from the old ones. For the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often even more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are." Such is the power of this myth-making that the people will not only automatically react negatively against dissent from the accepted view, but they also will be will-

1. James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), page viii.

ing to die, or to kill, for it. The ancient Grecian and Roman empires, and the more recent Nazi and Soviet regimes of the Twentieth Century, all relied on the power of propaganda and pageantry to control the public, and are standing testimonies to the truth of Ecclesiastes 1:9: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun."



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