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I'm proud to be an American

Steve Bakke  April 22, 2022



While admiring the commitment Ukrainians are making to protect their country, I find myself wondering about Americans' commitment to the United States.

Many years ago, I stood in the lobby of the National archives, mesmerized by our founding documents. I had a sense of being in the presence of our Founders. Each night those original copies of our Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and Bill of Rights are lowered into a bomb-proof safe, because no amount of money can measure the true treasure represented by those documents. Nevertheless, some Americans have set out to diminish the United States, its founding, and its form of government. I found several shocking and disappointing examples.

“Charters of Freedom” is how the National Archives refers collectively to these documents. As with all government agencies, the Archives recently did an internal evaluation of its operations, looking for evidence of racism and other transgressions. One member of the group suggested eliminating the “Charters of Freedom” title from its web pages, publications and exhibits because “these documents did not result in freedom for everyone.”

That recommendation was wisely rejected, but the committee did decide to make a change that shocked me. Perhaps they felt they had to come up with something, so they officially concluded that our founding documents might be “harmful or difficult to view.....because some users believe they depict ‘outdated, biased, offensive, and possibly violent views and opinions.’” A “trigger warning” will now accompany each document in the form of a statement intended to alert readers to potentially distressing material.

Here's a similar example. These same documents are published and sold to anyone who wants to use them for reference, study, or just as a keepsake. Some publishers require that a “trigger warning” precede the published text. Here's a warning I found on the copyright page of a reprint of these documents: *“This book is a product of its time and does not reflect the same values as it would if it were written today. Parents might wish to discuss with their children how views on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and interpersonal relations have changed since this book was written before allowing them to read this classic work.”*

This language of apology and relativism implies that our youth should be cautious about taking our founding documents literally, or too seriously. The potential damage of that approach scares me.

Turning to another example, “The 1619 Project” is a retelling of dark aspects of U.S. history – slavery and racism wrapped in violence and cruelty. These are part of our history for sure, but the document is not a history book. Rather, it’s a series of essays and unique impressions of events. Ideally, historical detail could be added to round out and balance the presentations.

Our history books could be enhanced and improved, for sure. Projects like “1619” could, if used wisely, enhance the record by adding context and impressions of witnesses and others. Unfortunately, what has developed is an attempt by some to elbow out other legitimate historical facts. Some self-proclaimed experts concluded that our core national history and traditions are false. And some radical elements assert that America was fraudulently established and claim our Founders primary objective was to perpetuate slavery.

We must resist these radical and easily refuted claims. But while celebrating ways America and its founding should be applauded, credibility demands that we acknowledge ways America has failed to live up to the ideals embodied in its founding. There are many. So, how can we effectively express our feelings about America?

Consider what occurred after the recent Supreme Court nomination hearings. I was impressed and encouraged by an emotional comment expressed by the newly approved nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson. She stated: *“We have come a long way toward perfecting our union. In my family it took just one generation to go from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States.”* She’s sincerely expressing appreciation for the wonders of America.

Speaking for myself, I don’t believe I’m guilty of nationalistic arrogance. Rather, I do believe in the incredible uniqueness surrounding the formation of the United States. Neither before our nation’s founding nor since, has there been a nation that recognized its citizens as sovereign, rather than the government. Think about that. What a wonderful idea!

I reject any inclinations to ignore elements of our history that don’t reflect our ideals. Yet, in spite of all those flaws, let’s agree that the United States is unique and deserving of considerable credit for its many accomplishments.

Policy analyst Douglas Andrews reminds us that too often, those who consider themselves Americans first and foremost are often “derided as xenophobes, racists, white supremacists – or even worse, as patriots. Nevertheless, let’s resist the other extreme of defining ourselves primarily in terms of specific groups, or political tribes – i.e., hyphenated Americans.

Our founding ideals are worthy, and we must not let them fade. That objective will keep us on track as we assume the task of achieving those ideals we’ve thus far failed to accomplish.

The formation of America is far from over, and I’m proud to be a participant in the process.