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Think of the Declaration of Independence as the nation's report card. How well do we live up to it?

How Imperfect People Form a More Perfect Union

By Neil Gorsuch

The Declaration of Independence is a short document, not much longer than this essay. Even so, it contains three ideas that shocked the world in 1776: Each of us is born equal; God grants us all inviolable rights, including the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and "We the People" have the right to govern ourselves.

Those three ideas represent America's creed. When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration in rooms he rented from a Philadelphia bricklayer, few in Europe believed in them. More than that, many considered them a threat to the existing social and political order. But to the patriots who fought in the long and brutal years of the American Revolution, those three ideas were worth the sacrifice of "our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

The Declaration's three great ideas still speak to us. Really, the Declaration serves as our nation's report card. At any point in history, the American people can assess how well we are living up to the Declaration's promises—and what challenges remain. In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues at Seneca Falls, N.Y., reminded the American people that men and women are created equal. Years later, Abraham Lincoln called on the country to live up to the Declaration's promises in the face of slavery, secession, and a bloody Civil War. Martin Luther King Jr.—standing before the Lincoln Memorial in 1963—challenged Jim Crow and called on the country to redeem the Declaration's "promissory note" for all Americans. Our nation will always be a work in progress, but the Declaration stands as a constant reminder of who we aspire to be. *Note*

Nor should our nation's imperfections blind us to the tremendous inheritance we have received. Even a quick glance through history and around our world today confirms how rare it is for a nation to be founded on the hope of realizing equality, liberty and self-government for its citizens. As Daniel Webster observed, it took thousands of years of human history for a nation devoted to the Declaration's three great ideas to arise, and "miracles" like that "do not cluster."

The legacy of the Declaration, though, owes only a partial debt to the genius of the document and those who wrote it. Its real guardian, and its hope for the future, lies in the hearts of the American people. Equality, liberty and self-government became the nation's creed because Americans in generation after generation chose them. And the survival of those ideas depends on each passing generation learning about them anew, engaging with the history that gave rise to them, and choosing them all over again.

Yes, we have our differences. But that was true even at our nation's founding. Americans hotly debated whether to part ways with Britain.

The first vote on the Declaration of Independence split the colonies. Federalists and Anti-Federalists disagreed over whether to ratify the Constitution. Today Americans disagree strongly about important matters, as they always have and perhaps always will. But that, in many ways, is our nation's greatest strength. By allowing everyone to speak and vote, we seek to harness the ideas of not only one ruler or group of elites; we seek to tap the full wisdom of the American people. In the face of disagreement, we speak and listen, debate and compromise, vote and then chart our way forward together. All of that is exactly what the Declaration hoped for us, and all of it lies at the core of the great American experiment. *Note*

The American story is like no other, and this year we celebrate a milestone like no other: the founding of the longest-living republic in the world. I look forward to the celebrations—the parades and picnics, the speeches and fireworks. But I also hope that all Americans will spend some time reflecting on the Declaration and recommitting to its creed. I hope, too, that each of us takes this opportunity to learn more about some of the ordinary people who sacrificed so much to make America possible: those who fought a revolution against the most powerful empire on earth, who began our

improbable experiment in selfgovernment, who challenged the nation to live up to the Declaration's promises throughout our history, and who in every generation have given their lives for the cause of liberty, equality, and self-government. To them we owe a debt beyond repayment, and thanks to them we have the opportunity to continue the work of forming "a more perfect Union."

Justice Gorsuch is an honorary co-chairman of the National Constitution Center. This article is adapted from the National Constitution Center's anthology "The Promise of America: Reflections on Our Enduring Ideals," forthcoming from Simon & Schuster May 12.

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