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RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
THURSDAY, JULY 4, 2024

Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Can you say Semiquincentennial?

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 07.04.24



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Happy Independence Day!

Did you know that 2026 is the Semiquincentennial? Say that 10 times fast! It's a mouthful, isn't it?

That's right: The 250th anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, or the Semiquincentennial, is just around the corner. But it's not too early to celebrate!

These days, however, such celebrations might meet with the following objections:

- Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration's principal author, owned hundreds of slaves, contradicting his proclamation of liberty. Doesn't his Declaration rhetoric, therefore, ring hollow?
- Wasn't the Declaration silent on slavery and women's rights?
- Didn't the Founders' treatment of indigenous peoples fall short of the Declaration's ideals?
- Don't these omissions and actions undermine the sincerity and power of the Declaration's articulation of freedom and equality?

Recently I was with Jane Kamensky, the president of Monticello in Charlottesville, Va. She quoted someone saying the Founders should be taught "warts and all and not all warts."

The Founders, including Jefferson, were flesh-and-blood humans operating within the constraints of their time. It's anachronistic and unfair to judge them by standards they couldn't have met. Despite their faults, they established principles that elevated standards for posterity, enabling the very criticisms we level against them today.

When the Declaration was drafted, slavery was a global institution, common in most countries. That document shifted attitudes against bondage and toward liberty, inspiring later generations, including the abolitionists, to advance ideals of freedom, equality, and human rights worldwide. Though its initial application was limited, and some countries haven't fully realized its principles, its impact has been far-reaching and enduring.

The Founders deserve praise and admiration. In the lead-up to 2026, you can honor them and the Fourth of July all year long. Here are some ways to do that:

- Read the Declaration aloud with friends and family.
- Vacation in Philadelphia, but book a hotel soon. They'll be expensive these next two years.
- Host a civics bee — like a spelling bee — testing knowledge of American history and government.
- Write thank you notes to the Founders and send them to the American Village in Montevallo, Ala.
- Bury a time capsule with essays about America today, commemorative coins, recent newspapers, and a map of the United States with current state boundaries.
- Throw neighborhood parties with American flags and Americana decorations.
- Start a reading group to discuss books about the American Founding and Founders.
- Bake patriotic cookies in the shapes of George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.
- Create a calendar highlighting key dates and events of the American Revolution, similar to an Advent calendar, but covering the entire year. Each day features a significant moment from the Revolutionary period, allowing children to learn American history year-round.

You're probably more creative than I am and can come up with better ideas, but the Semiquincentennial is the optimal opportunity to combine fun and education.

It allows us to examine history and gain a deeper appreciation of the events and figures that shaped our form of government.

Moreover, it enables us to contextualize current political debates through historical precedents, study the roots of American experience, and contemplate both changes and continuities in American culture.

This month's "Word to the Wise" is from the Declaration's Preamble: "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 are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

If this is but an ideal, then let us at least strive for it earnestly.

This piece is adapted from Allen Mendenhall's regular segment "Word to the Wise" on Troy Public Radio.

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