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Reflections on Independence Day
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In spite of the fact that Independence Day is a national and not a religious holiday I simply cannot allow myself to stand here on this particular day and not speak about the nature of our nation as I understand her, and to identify what I see as the source of her greatness. For in spite of our many missteps along the way we are a great nation, and more often than not a truly good one as well, which may in the larger and longer view of things be even more important. So let us pause for a moment here and consider ourselves as a people, as a nation. But let us also start with a moment of honesty about our beginnings, for it is the key to seeing our importance and value in the recent history of the world.

In the Declaration of Independence Jefferson advanced several truths which he identified as “self evident.” First among these truths was that “all men are created equal” and also “that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Eighty seven years later Abraham Lincoln would refer to the “self evident truth” of the natural equality of people and in so doing shift the entire focus of the Civil War in a single breath when he said at Gettysburg

that we were fighting that war to answer the question of whether “any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.”

Yet we know that it was not – either in 1863 or in 1776 - a self evident truth that all men were created equal. Slavery was very much a fact of life when Jefferson wrote his famous words, and in the Dred Scott decision the Taney Supreme Court ruled that slavery was settled constitutional and not simply statutory law. Moreover, the complete displacement of the aboriginal people of North America was well under way by the time of the Civil War, the most egregious example of which was the “trail of tears” carried out under the aegis of that most populist and democratic of presidents, Andrew Jackson. It hardly needed be added, though I do add it, that throughout the country women could hold property, but could not vote or hold elected office. It is thus beyond peradventure that at our nation’s founding and through much of our history the vast majority of those in power did not believe in the true equality of all people, and were in fact deeply disturbed by the very notion.

What I want to suggest to you this morning is that the fact that we can look back upon this time in our history, and notice the glaring inconsistencies between our practice and our stated beliefs with regret and even in some instances shame, is precisely the key to our continued greatness, and our goodness as a people, which, as I stated a moment ago, is perhaps more important. For we were among the first people to have the courage to shape a

government that enshrined in the constitution and in law the freedom to critique ourselves, and to declare the necessity of doing so. We are a people so deeply imbued with the power of our Judeo-Christian heritage that we dared to assume as a nation, as a people, that we could be wrong, that we could “err and stray” from God’s ways “like lost sheep,” and so “follow the devices and desires of our own hearts.” We dared to imagine shaping a nation with the ability to engage in self judgment, and with the institutions and mechanisms that would allow us not simply to notice wherein we had departed from our original inspiration, but to change without destroying ourselves, and return to that inspiration, and even, more dramatically, to allow ourselves to be led by that original inspiration to new heights of freedom not imaginable by those who wrote the documents that created this nation. That is a great gift and blessing both to us and to the world, and I would add that it is the source of our durability as a nation.

I do not remember when I first encountered the saying, or even its source, but I do recall in my reading in various political and philosophical treatises this remarkable adage that guided the development of the Soviet Union under Stalin. “There are some questions that a good communist does not ask.” That, in a nutshell, is why the Soviet Union self destructed after less than eighty years. They had no capacity to for self examination, no ability to imagine wherein they had gotten off track. The Soviet Union was ideologically

committed to the notion that they could do no wrong; every atrocity against their own people, and other nations, was justified as a necessary step along the way to the dictatorship of the proletariat and the subsequent withering away of the state in fulfillment of Marx's utopian vision. The Soviet Union did not die because it was communist. The Soviet Union died because it could not believe that it could sin, and so it could tolerate no opposition, and therefore learn from no one.

We are not that way. Though it is incredibly hard, and often terribly painful, we, collectively, as a people, as a nation, can learn, and therefore can change, can grow, can adapt and expand our views. And as a people, as a nation we have grown the most when we were willing to go through the often excruciating process of learning from our victims, from the people we have treated unjustly, from those we have oppressed. The sequestering and internment of people of Japanese descent during the Second World War was not simply unnecessary, it was wrong. We know that now because we were able to look at what we did to these folks, and realize we had violated the rights of American citizens, many of whom fought for this country during that war. Because we learned from their experience we will not do that again. Jim Crow was finally vanquished because we collectively became able to see through the stories of black folk what Jim Crow did to black people, and so the fatuous and self justifying notion that "those people" wanted segregation was exposed for

the lie that it was. The rights of women to full equality before the law came about because collectively, as a nation, we listened to their stories and were changed.

None of it is easy, indeed all of it is hard, for we do not come to these moments of self reflection all at once or all together. Always there are people out ahead of the rest of us, seeing what most of us cannot see, dreaming what most of us cannot dream, and so working for what most of us cannot yet accept. But thus far in our history, though there have been missteps and blind alleys, when the movement has been consistent with implications of the vision of our founders, we have learned to listen, and change. We have been willing and able to say that “there are no questions a good American may not ask” and that has been blessing and gift to us and to the world.

The greatness of our nation, and the key to our goodness as a people, is that we have never assumed that we have attained a “perfect union” of this nation. We are aware of our limitations, our frailty, and so our constant effort is to be open to the possibility, and thus to work for the establishment of a “more perfect union” one that collectively we realize is always proximate, always evolving, always subject to correction and growth. We are, for example, now engaged in great debates about health care and immigration reform, subjects on which almost no one is satisfied that we have it right. This dissatisfaction makes life difficult for everyone, there is no doubt of that, but it

is this dissatisfaction, this collective unwillingness to insist in spite of the evidence that there is nothing we need do, that spurs us on until we reach that point, where, for the moment we do have things right. Were it that we were unwilling to endure this critique of ourselves we would not be having this debate right now and both health care and immigration problems would continue to worsen until they became entirely unmanageable. But we are willing to engage, we are willing to examine our own systems, and we are going to change over time in accordance with the principles of freedom and equality that have always governed us. Again, that ability makes us not simply great as a nation, it makes us good as a people.

This is how I know we are blessed by God. I reject categorically that our military power and the size of our economy are the signs of God's blessing, even as I reject with equal firmness the idea that hurricane Katrina was a sign that God had removed that blessing. We are blessed by God because over time, through what Robert Penn Warren called the “powerful, painful grinding process of history” we have maintained the ability to recognize our faults, repent of them, and change. Only if we lose that ability, and destroy those institutions we have created to safeguard this precious gift of self reflection will we then fail as people and fall as a nation. As long as we retain this gift, and use it well, we will remain a great nation, populated by good people, and thus continue to be as Lincoln said, “the last best hope of earth.”

