

Happy Birthday:

When the Founders started things here, far across the pond from the mother country, they had quite a revolutionary thing in mind. The central idea, that men are created equal and free, had been circulating for a while in Europe. But the notion that these free men could govern themselves, quite apart from a royal family ruling by Divine Right, was an ambitious step forward. In fact the founders invoked the deity to justify their own Divine Right, the right to self determination. Big difference between, "Yes, your highness, right away" and "I think we might have a problem with that, let us get back to you". Big difference between putting up with the remote inanities of the Hanovers and dumping their tea over the side, into Boston harbor.

It's a good thing that the American Colonies were thousands of miles and an ocean away from London. It's a good thing that the English were more concerned with the French or else the whole experiment might have been doomed from the beginning. If the American Colonies were as close to London as Ireland, Scotland and Wales we might still be arguing about the "idea" of Independence. Our office seekers might still be running for a seat in Parliament. And we might still be getting the day off for the Queen's birthday.

But it worked; we got loose from the distracted, arrogant parent country and set out on our own. Along the way the American experiment has evolved and transformed itself repeatedly. I think that this ongoing ability to change is one of our strong suits. It's something we should honor and support. When a notion comes along that seems strange or uncomfortable we should at least give it a respectful look. Consider the alternative.

The Founders really did mean that all men are created equal. But they were talking exclusively about males. There was virtually no consideration of women as citizens. They were also talking only about white men. The original Americans (as in Algonquin, Pequot, Iroquois and Crow) were not in the mix. Imported Africans were lumped in another section of the non-human melting pot. The Founders were talking about white males, period. And in most states they further limited equality rights to white male land owners. Now that's a fairly restrictive view of equality. But it was a start.

Thankfully we have moved beyond the boys' club (at least as far as citizenship goes) and into a country that is diverse and inclusive. A snapshot of this country today compared to a tin type from 150 years ago is astounding. In 1858 the nation was headed unswervingly towards civil war. More than 600,000 Americans died in that war. Americans killing Americans. Humans were bought and sold in town halls. Women were kept and treated as homestead property. Children were cranked out as useful additions to the work force. Domestic abuse was standard practice. A life of back breaking work in deteriorating health was what the average person would expect. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing. If you didn't die young on the farm you died young at the mill.

All this is easy enough to write about but I would venture a guess that we really have no idea just how different we are from the people that we were. No idea at all of how lucky we are to be alive now, in these times.

So here's to our country, here and now. The place ain't perfect, not by a long shot. But I, for one, am raising my glass to the place that we've got. Happy birthday, to this splendid home. Happy birthday America.