



Letter from the President, Peter Goettler

One of my proudest moments as a parent came when my twin daughters, our oldest, were in eighth or ninth grade. They were complaining that all their history classmates were castigating Thomas Jefferson for being a hypocrite, refusing to concede any value to the man. I forget the precise language they used, but my daughters argued for a more balanced view: recognizing Jefferson's sins while also recognizing the tremendous contributions he and the rest of the Founding generation made.

The part that took my breath away was the twins' ability to take another step in their understanding. They identified the deeper irony that a group of men who owned other human beings, or at the very least accepted the practice, could somehow unleash the forces of liberal progress that would not only end slavery, but also keep America always moving in a direction of vindicating the equal rights of all its people.

Those visits to Monticello, Independence Hall, the National Archives, and more, along with lots of family conversation, thankfully had landed. The world isn't yet perfect, but it's a lot closer than it was in 1776 thanks to those imperfect men.

For all the greatness of his philosophy and ideas, Jefferson *was* a hypocrite. And while so many of our fellow citizens—like those eighth graders—can't see beyond his sins, it's important that the rest of us don't glide too easily past them.

Yes, some may dwell on the Founders' wrongdoings, but that doesn't mean others aren't too quick to minimize them. Our objective

has to be intellectual honesty, for this can have a profound effect on our credibility.

And the stakes of getting this right are high. When people dismiss the Founders as irredeemably flawed, they rarely stop there. They use that judgment to discredit everything the Founders gave us. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution weren't merely political documents. They were revolutionary statements that human beings are born free with rights that precede government, that government derives its authority only from the consent of the governed, and that individuals have the right to live their lives as they see fit, free from the arbitrary exercise of power. The system they designed, with its separation of powers, protection of free expression and religious liberty, limits on government reach, and embrace of free exchange, created the conditions for the most prosperous and free society the world has ever seen. We need the credibility, integrity, and energy to protect that inheritance.

We must be uncompromising in our defense of what the Founders created and their philosophy—which is, in large part, our own—even though they didn't live up to it. Perhaps *especially* because they didn't live up to it. Because their mistakes cannot be allowed to obscure the values and system they built, or give license to those who wish to dismantle them.

And we know this is what has happened. When the fact that slaveholders didn't live up to the ideals of the Declaration and, later, the

Constitution, is used to impugn those very ideals, the achievements of the Founding are placed at risk. One of the greatest gifts ever given to future generations is maligned rather than celebrated.

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration is a fitting time to commit ourselves to reversing this narrative. The tremendous progress of the past 250 years has come because of the Founding, not in spite of it. The Founding generation launched—quite imperfectly—what became the greatest experiment of liberty the world has known. In so doing, they set in motion a forward march of progress and prosperity, and the continued vindication of each citizen's natural rights, which have never stopped.

On July 3, 1776—the day after the Continental Congress voted to approve the resolution of independence—John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that the day America declared independence “will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America,” predicting that it would be celebrated by generations to come with “pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations.”

The Founding justly deserves celebration on its 250th . . . and always.



Peter Goettler
President and CEO