THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

Promoting the vision that all men are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

September 2021

JACK MILLER CENTER *For Teaching America's Founding Principles and History*

The Revolutionary War officially ended on September 3, 1783, which marked our long-awaited independence from Great Britain. So why do we celebrate Independence Day on July 4th? JMC faculty partner Susan McWilliams Barndt discusses the significance of the date, what the birth of the American Experiment really means for us, and why we should not abandon the promises of our Declaration of Independence, but build on them.

The July 4 Project

Susan McWilliams Barndt

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Why don't we celebrate September 3? Why do we celebrate July 4?

From the mouths of babes: My 10-year-old recently posed these questions to me over breakfast. She had been studying the American Revolution with her fourth-grade class. These questions, she said, were bugging her and some of her friends.

After all, the American colonies didn't really get independence until September 3, 1783, when representatives of Great Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Paris that formally ended the Revolutionary War and set the boundaries of a new nation.

By comparison, on July 4, 1776, "there were just a bunch of guys telling everybody what they wanted."

So why would we call July 4 "Independence Day" and set off the fireworks then? And why doesn't anybody but historians and fourth-graders remember September 3?

To Celebrate and to Mourn

In 1852, Frederick Douglass raised his own question about the celebration of July 4: "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" It was evidently hypocritical, he said, for a slaving nation to support the claiming of political freedom.

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Why should "we" celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, asked Douglass, when only some of us have been its political beneficiaries? Here's how he put it, to his largely white audience:

"The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony."

That is, Douglass talked to his audience about how their celebration of the July 4 holiday failed to live up to the standards of the document signed on July 4, 1776. The ideas set on paper on that day, said Douglass, are worthy of the highest veneration; "the principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost."

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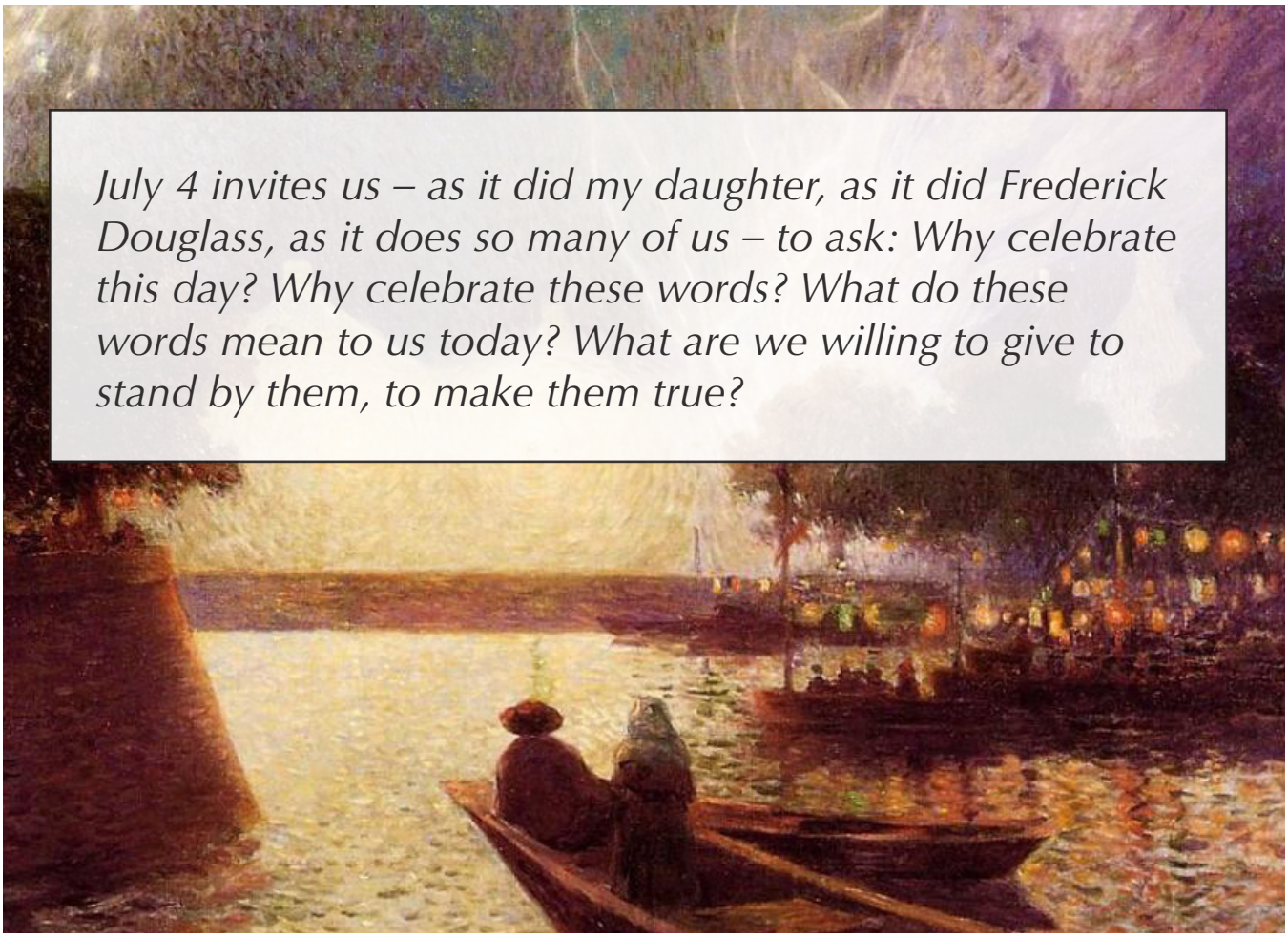
the Declaration. We should mourn our failure to live up to those ideals in our lives and laws. We should mourn, and then we should commit to fight for those ideals anew.

Hearing the Truth

On July 4, 1776, a group of men gathered together in Philadelphia and signed on to a statement of audacious ambition and aspiration. In it, they declared the truth of human equality and articulated a moral standard for governance.

And while what happened in that room in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776, was a signature political achievement of the American nation, it has also always signaled our political failures as a nation. The United States has never lived up to the promise of that statement and standard in full: not on September 3, 1783; not on July 4, 1852; and not on July 4, 2021.

As Samuel Huntington put it, there is a "promise of disharmony" at the root of American politics. There are endemic tensions between our ideals, as articulated in the Declaration, and our institutions, between the radical



moral ambition of our creed and the serious moral imperfection of our habits and laws.

One way to deal with this foundational disharmony might be to just to decide the whole nation – and what was said in the Declaration – is a lie or a sham. Robert Frost considers that possibility in his poem "The Black Cottage":

"Her giving somehow touched the principle

That all men are created free and equal….

That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.

What did he mean? Of course the easy way

Is to decide it simply isn't true."

But even if some people make that decision – deny the truth of human equality, assert the impossibility of political freedom, write off the nation for its evident hypocrisies – the words in that document will continue to haunt us. "Never mind," says Frost:

"The Welshman got it planted

Where it will trouble us a thousand years.

Each age will have to reconsider it."

July 4 invites us to reconsideration. July 4 invites us to be haunted by the Declaration, to let its words whisper to us, across the breeze of the centuries, and demand a hearing.

A Moral Vision for the Future

When we celebrate July 4, we signal that political independence has its roots in moral vision. And while the history of the American nation teaches us that moral vision may need to be backed up by martial force – that's where dates like September 3, 1783, and April 9, 1865 come in – it is the moral vision in the end that gives that force its meaning.

July 4 invites us to re-root ourselves in that moral vision, a moral vision

both imperfectly articulated and imperfectly realized but none the less precious for being so. July 4 invites us to recommit to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, to mourn our historical and present failures to live up to its promise, but to charge ourselves to seek what Abraham Lincoln once called "a new birth of freedom."

July 4 invites us – as it did my daughter, as it did Frederick Douglass, as it does so many of us – to ask: Why celebrate this day? Why celebrate these words? What do these words mean to us today? What are we willing to give to stand by them, to make them true?

But even if some people make that decision – deny the truth of human equality, assert the impossibility of political freedom, write off the nation for its evident hypocrisies – the words in that document will continue to haunt us.

When we celebrate July 4, let us celebrate with a sense of aspiration rather than achievement. We can be haunted by our national ghosts and yet still call to our better angels. Just as on July 4, 1776, there is still work to be done, to bring the nation that was promised on that day closer to being.

On this holiday we remember the radical moral aspiration that both inspires and indicts us, let us work together, as James Baldwin put it, to "achieve our country."

Susan McWilliams Barndt is chair and professor of politics at Pomona College. She is also a co-editor of American Political Thought *and a regular contributor to* The Constitutionalist*, in which this essay first appeared.*

ABOUT THE CONSTITUTIONALIST

"The July 4 Project" was featured in *The Constitutionalist* on July 3, 2021. The Jack Miller Center sponsors this editorial website to engage educators and anyone interested in constitutional perspectives and historical insight into current events. Its authors are open to a range of political perspectives, and essays reflect different viewpoints.

Using expertise in political philosophy, American political development, public law, and political culture and literature, the site aims to foster conversation across disciplines and party lines.

The Constitutionalist is edited by Benjamin Kleinerman, professor of political science at Baylor University and a member of the Jack Miller Center Board.

Visit *The Constitutionalist* at **theconstitutionalist.org**.

JACK MILLER CENTER

For Teaching America's Founding Principles & History

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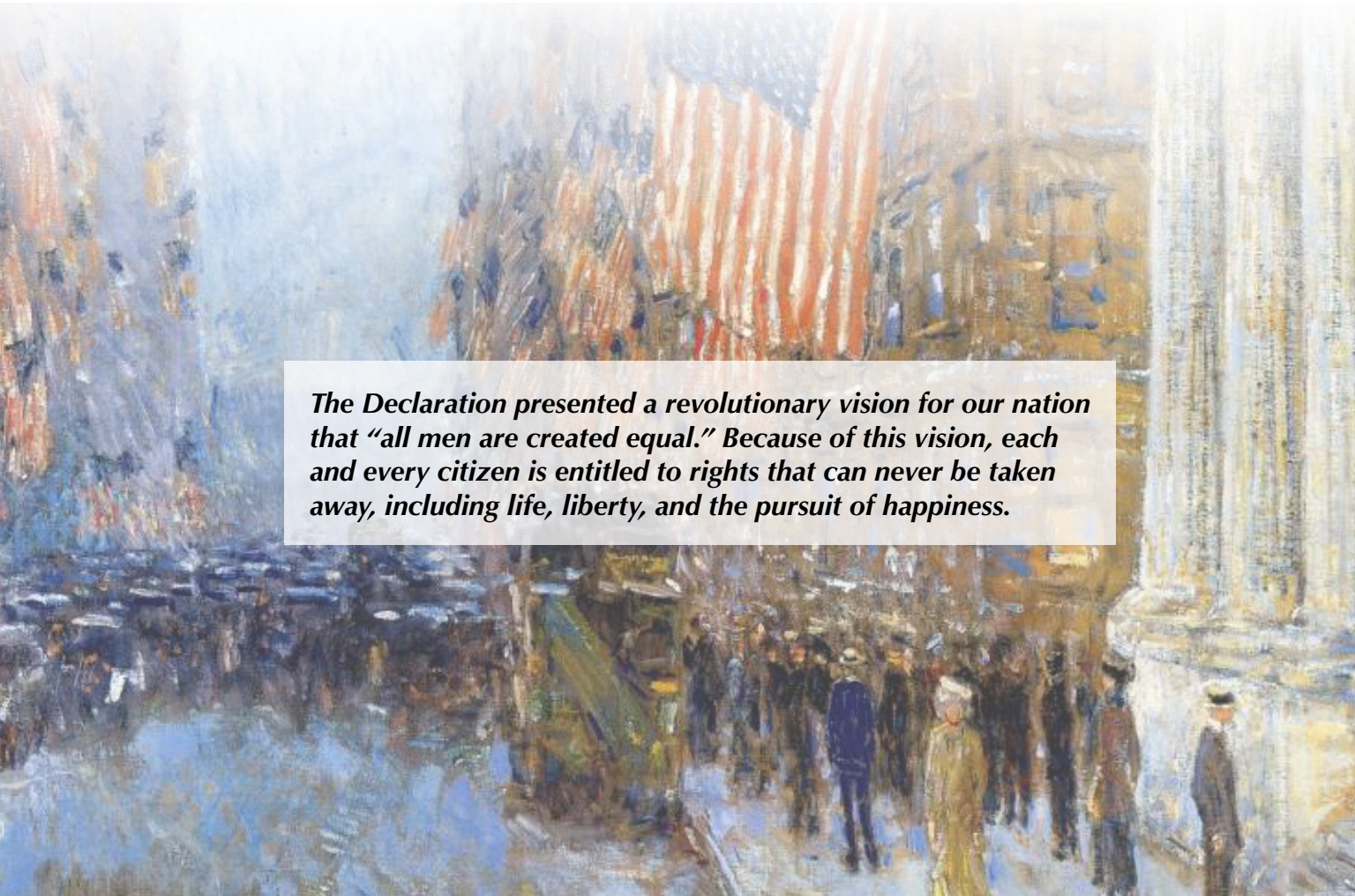
Jack Miller
Chairman of the Board



The Declaration presented a revolutionary vision for our nation that "all men are created equal." Because of this vision, each and every citizen is entitled to rights that can never be taken away, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.