

Guest commentary: Federal Glover: Declaration of Independence: A document that needed improvement

By Federal Glover For the Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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The thought of July Fourth reminds me of that hot, muggy summer of 1776 when our Founding Fathers debated whether to free the 13 colonies from the rule of the English king.

Imagine how uncomfortable those men felt. If you have ever been in Philadelphia in July, you know what I mean. The temperature may not reach 100 degrees, but the humidity drowns you and drains you so one cannot think straight.

Imagine those brilliant gentlemen in their wool coats, neckerchiefs and wigs, the fashion of the day. They talked, met, drank warm ale, then met and talked some more, caucusing late into the evening to gather support for their daring initiative.

They were under enormous pressure. Fighting between the colonists and British troops, the mightiest military of the day, had broken out the year before and not all the colonies were on the same page.

They battled through the humidity and disagreements to create one of history's most important documents.

The Continental Congress representatives had to travel back and forth between Philadelphia and their home colonies to get the approval of their governors and legislature. Then they had to return and rewrite to make sure that all the objections and reservations of the colonies were addressed.

So the historic document opens: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The declaration starts with the revolutionary concept, "all men are created equal." What a major radical breakthrough in thinking in that age of monarchies.

Despite the inspirational opening paragraphs, the document had its flaws. Imperfections in making laws occur to gain the important overriding goal, which in this case was the formation of a new republic. Every word, every phrase, every idea is put through the meat grinder of debate and compromise.

Historians agree that when the Declaration of Independence was written, the authors were referring only to landowning white men. Rights for black slaves, Native Americans and women were not addressed.

In the original draft written by Thomas Jefferson, he denounced slavery. He had declared slavery as a "hideous blot," even though he himself owned more than 100 slaves. At least one with whom he had several children.

Many colonists, even slaveholders, had mixed feelings, and even hated slavery. George Washington, a slave owner, denounced the practice as "repugnant." Slave owner James Mason of Virginia condemned it as "evil." But the reality was that -- at that time -- the richest states were the tobacco-growing states, which

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were dependent on slave labor. They were not going to budge on that issue.

Northern states, some which had already outlawed slavery, did not push the issue of slavery in order to reach the ultimate goal: the creation of the union, albeit, an imperfect union.

For the sake of securing the support of the southern colonies, the signers of the Declaration of Independence deleted the following:

... he [the king of Britain] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another."

In today's vernacular: The Founding Fathers punted.

The imperfections of the document can only be understood in the context of the times in which it was written. However, the future direction of our republic was clearly stated in that opening paragraph. Those gentlemen of 1776 left the door open for the truly radical concept of equality to flourish and expand.

Today's politicians — from the President of the United States to the Board of Supervisors, down to the commissioners on advisory boards, are still trying to perfect the Union as we struggle with the complexities and inequities of our own time.

This Independence Day, aside from the fireworks, picnics and day off work, remember those brilliant men who literally sweated over the task they had before them to give birth to the United States of America.

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