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Birth of a Nation

Next week Americans will celebrate the 231st anniversary of the birth of our nation. As it should be, the July 4th holiday will be a time of festivities complete with backyard barbecues, parades and fireworks. Many will take advantage of the time off to go to the lake, to travel or to catch up on projects around the house. Yet amid the sounds of celebration come the faint echoes of voices long silenced but calling us to remember.

Perhaps more than any other day, July 4th holds a place of special and solemn distinction in America's history. The day we happily celebrate also calls us to respectfully remember. On this day we reflect on the cost of freedom and on the priceless gift of liberty we have been given.

This gift of freedom handed down to us from previous generations was paid for at a terrible cost. Consider the first Independence Day in 1776. The founders of the new American Republic knew that they were quite literally pledging "their lives and their sacred honor" by daring to defy the mighty British Empire.

In spite of the risk, brave men such as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson helped establish a free and independent nation, endured a bloody conflict and later helped guide the fledgling country through its first tenuous years. It is fitting tribute to the solemnity of the day that the aged Adams and Jefferson, former political opponents, having mended their broken friendship, both died within hours of each other on July the 4th, 1826, the nation's 50th birthday.

Thirty-seven years later, the celebration of Independence Day came amid one of the nation's most trying times. On July 4th, 1863, America was in the midst of the Civil War. The day before, on July 3rd the Union had won a decisive battle near the sleepy town of Gettysburg; followed the next day by a victory at Vicksburg. Yet it was hard to celebrate a victory that came at such a cost. At Gettysburg alone 40,000 American soldiers had been killed or wounded. At Vicksburg the nation had suffered thousands more casualties, many of them Missourians from the 22 regiments sent to fight for the Union or the 17 fighting for the Confederacy.

It was against this backdrop, at a ceremony to commemorate the nation's war dead at Gettysburg that President Lincoln uttered his most famous words. In his address he reminded America of the price of freedom and also of the immeasurable worth of the

liberty we enjoy.

Another July 4th is nearly upon us and the nation is again at war. We grieve at the stark images of our young soldiers fighting and dying in a war against extremists who would gladly snuff out liberty's flame in their quest to impose their totalitarian worldview. Yet even today Lincoln's words resound across the years with a truth that is timeless. Amid the festivities of the holiday, let us listen and take them to heart:

“It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced . . . that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.