

Freedom, liberty and an occasional hot dog

I am inspired every time I visit Washington, D.C. with our OAN volunteer leaders and participate in the democratic process, as we did in May.

Every year, we talk directly with the members of Oregon's congressional delegation, as well as committee staffers and members of the administration. Our aim is to make sure our elected and appointed decision makers appreciate the economic importance of the nursery and greenhouse industry, and understand the issues we face.

This kind of direct communication with the government is quintessentially American. Having a hand in it every spring helps me appreciate the Fourth of July holiday that comes soon after.

For many, that day represents the birthday of the United States. It's a time when families gather to light off fireworks and have an old-fashioned, red-white-and-blue picnic. But like many holidays, there's a story behind it that goes much deeper.

Independence Day recognizes the day when the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and adopted the Declaration of Independence. It was a bold proclamation asserting that the 13 American colonies were forming a new nation of 2.5 million people and breaking away from the British Empire.

The declaration was approved by Congress on July 4, 1776, but the date of its signing has been disputed. Many historians maintain it was signed nearly a month after its adoption, on August 2, 1776.

Through much of the fledgling nation's early years, the day was rarely celebrated, in part due to tensions between the two major political parties of the time.

The Democratic-Republicans admired the work done by Thomas Jefferson. The Federalists (led by Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and others) thought it to be "too French" and anti-British. These disagreements cast doubt on the long-term survival of the tenets expressed just a few years prior.

After the War of 1812 and the col-

lapse of the Federalists, the declaration began to circulate around the country and people began to internalize the call of freedom. With the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams — infamously, both on the Fourth of July in 1826 — such celebrations became more commonplace.

The Fourth of July was not a legal federal holiday until 1870. It took the 1938 Congress to affirm it and make sure all federal workers received full pay.

The meaning of the Fourth

I asked a number of OAN members what the Fourth of July means to them, and several common themes emerged.

Many said the holiday is the essence of being an American. It harks back to memories of families attending parades with brass bands blaring John Philip Sousa marches and frenetic waving of U.S. flags. It is the one date, especially for Oregonians, that signals the official start of summer.

Others felt blessed to live in a country where we enjoy freedom and safety. Many were reminded about the risk that our founders took to declare our independence from one of the great powers on the earth, and the subsequent number of men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice to preserve our way of life.

They said it is a day for expressing our deep feelings of patriotism. A day to celebrate liberty. A day to express hope that others in this complicated world take to the American example, where power is not derived from the government, but rather from the consent of the governed.

On Independence Day, we celebrate American opportunity and community. Our shared effort makes the nation better than what we could achieve on our own.

Evolution of the Constitution

Our founders had the guts to declare independence, but moreover, they had the wisdom to craft a constitution that embodies rule of law for an ever-changing nation.

The Constitution has been amended only 27 times. The first 10 amendments — the Bill of Rights — were ratified in 1791.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The most recent amendment, pertaining to Congressional pay raises, was ratified in 1992, more than two centuries after it was initially proposed (1789).

Constitutional amendments have been proposed more than 11,000 times. Six were passed by Congress but not ratified by the required number of states (currently, 38). A living document is a testament to the foresight of the Founding Fathers.

There is a reason that the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights and the Constitution are together at the National Archives in D.C. They outline a roadmap for freedom and liberty, providing an example to the entire world about what is possible when tyranny is challenged and people take control over their own lives and destiny.

The best country in the world

I wish I could impress the meaning of the Fourth on my two teenage girls. However, they have recently gained a better grasp of the tensions and issues of our nation's fight for independence from the musical "Hamilton." Next to that, I sound more like Charlie Brown's teacher, with the "wah wah" noises.

Nonetheless, I try my best to explain that despite all the challenges we face as a nation, the United States of America is still that shining example people always talk about — of self-reliance, self-determination and hope.

In talking about American democracy these days, we tend to focus on what makes us different from one another. But we still are bound together as a country of ideals and independence, and that's what makes us what we are: Americans. ☺