

On July 4: An Idea not a Nation Gabriel Moran

It may seem just a curious mistake that the United States of America celebrates its founding on July 4. However, instead of a slight historical error the claim that July 4, 1776 is “the birthday of America” is the lynchpin of the ideology on which the country is based. There was no nation of the United States of America in 1776 when a group of British colonies published a document entitled, “A Unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” These colonies declared themselves to be “independent states.” The United States of America began a little more than a decade later.

“America” can be dated as beginning in 1507 when a group of German map makers wrote the word America across the land that today is Brazil. They were naming a continent, a new kind of continent and even a new world. “America” connoted an empty space (though it actually wasn’t) where there was liberty for individuals to reinvent themselves and live in a new world. “America” has never lost that connotation which can be a powerful inspiration for oppressed people. It can also be a dangerous idea if an existing nation convinces itself that it is America.

From the nation’s beginning in the 1780s, there has been a deliberate equating of the history of the United States and the history of America. It is difficult to know the facts of U.S. history because they come wrapped in “America” which functions as a myth or an ideology.

When the group of “free and independent” states in the northeast corner of America decided to have a tighter federation, it could not decide on a name for itself. The united states of what? The term America was already taken but there was one way that “United States of America” would make sense, namely, if the nation and the continent were the same. For a comparison, “Australia” serves as both the name for the Commonwealth of Australia and the continent of Australia because the nation and the continent are co-extensive.

Obviously, the new nation in America was not co-extensive with America, but the founders believed that the new nation had a “continental destiny.” In a hundred-year war against the original Americans, the United States relentlessly pushed westward to fulfill its destiny to be America. Its attempts to go north and to go south were not as successful. It had to be satisfied with trying to control rather than incorporate the rest of America.

“America” in its mythical meaning is a perfect place. In religious terms it is the fulfilment of history; in secular terms, it is the dream of liberty for every individual. What started as a collection of thirteen states and became fifty states is tenuously held together by the dream of America where every man is free. The dream is not the reality; however, the constant interchanging of “United States” and “America” succeeds – up to a point – in convincing people that they live in America.

The “American history” books which are used in the schools tell the story of America as if it were the history of the country that the students live in. Some people discover later in life that the story that they were taught in school hides much of U.S. history. Other groups are painfully aware from the start that the story of equality and rights does not include them, but they are stuck with the language of the American story.

A year ago, the *New York Times* initiated the *1619 Project*. The purpose of the project is to call attention to the fact that slavery and its continuing repercussions in black lives is given little attention in “American history” books. As far back as the 1840s, writing by slaves showed a keen awareness that they were not living in America, but they could not get their voices heard. There was hope in the 1960s that things were changing. It turned out that not very much changed. An endless series of incidents of police confronting black people led finally to a murder that ignited pent-up feelings of anger.

The *1619 Project* showcased some historians and other writers who are working to integrate black experience into United States history. The project received a barrage of criticism as the *Times* presumably expected. A major criticism concerned the motive for the British American Revolution. The editors had to acknowledge that the claim that the main motivation was the protection of slavery cannot be proved. But there is evidence that it was part of the motivation..

People who have been writing books on “American history” for decades were quick to declare that of course they agreed that the experience of black people has not been sufficiently recognized. But they insisted that historians have to stick to facts. It was amusing to have famous historians claim that they deal only in facts and that the *1619 Project* was injecting ideology. Writers who interchange “America” and “United States” are oblivious of the bias which that creates. It blocks their recognition of when the United States began and what the experience of black people was and is. Several critics formulated the main claim of the *1619*

Project to be that the country began in 1619 instead of 1776. If the project meant to claim that the country began in 1619 it was wrong. But the claim that the United States began in 1776 is also wrong.

What difference does a date mean? In this case it is the difference between professing one's allegiance to a beautiful-sounding set of ideals or else working for justice in a flawed country. The political right-wing loves the Declaration of Independence where there is no government to contend with. The men are at liberty to pursue their happiness which in the past included owning people who did not have rights and which today allows for amassing absurd amounts of money.

A reliable guide for the competence and sanity of a U.S. president is how often he uses "America" for the country he leads. FDR in his first inaugural address used the word America once within the name of the country, the United States of America; he was intent on fixing the problems of the United States. Donald Trump began his inaugural address by speaking to "the citizens of America" and ended with a litany of what America will once again be: wealthy, proud, safe, and great.

The current president thinks he is the boss of America. He shows no knowledge of U.S. history or how the U.S. government works. He did not need to make America great again. America always was and always will be great, but the United States has been falling apart for decades. We do not need a president with a new vision of America; we need a president who will bring together competent people who can begin fixing the government of the United States. Attention to the actual country and its government would help U.S. citizens who have been overlooked in the greatness of America. A president might begin by reading Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"