

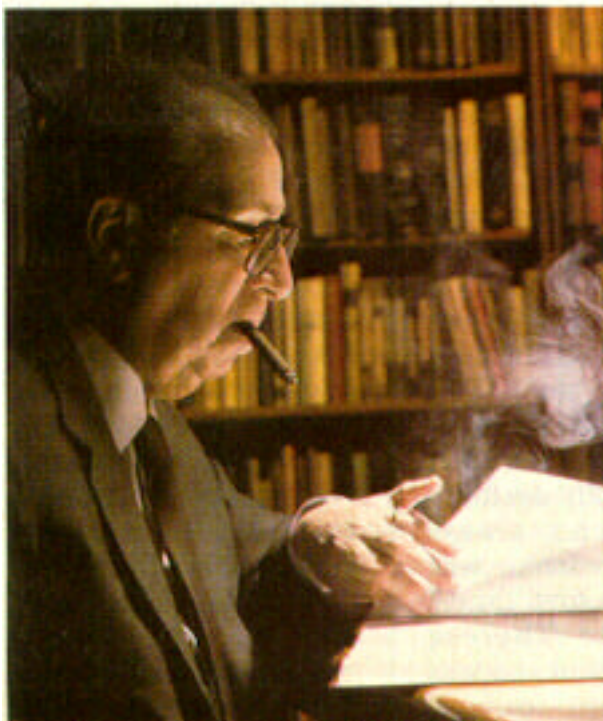
July 4, '00

89

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

IN CELEBRATION - JULY 4th

As individual celebrants of this occasion, the personal obligation of every citizen of the United States is to understand as well as possible the three documents that are our American testament—words that should be piously revered even though they are not in a strict sense this country's holy scriptures. This understanding occurs as a private accomplishment, not a public event. It is something done in the quiet of one's own mind, with the solemnity of sober reflection. --*Mortimer Adler*



AMERICA'S TESTAMENT*

by Mortimer Adler

Of the three great documents in the history of the United States—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—there is a closer affinity between the Declaration and the Gettysburg Address than there is between those two documents and the Constitution. I wish not only to call attention to this fact, but in the light of it to say why I think Abraham Lincoln is unique among the presidents of the United States.

In taking the oath of office, presidents, Lincoln among them, swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States. All the others do that willingly and without reservation, but not Lincoln. In my judgment, Lincoln is the only president who did that with some unspoken reservations, for he would have much preferred to pledge himself to uphold the principles of American government stated in the magnificent second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. (He is also the only true genius, like Shakespeare and Mozart, among our presidents.)

Why do I make this claim for Lincoln's uniqueness? It partly rests upon the words of the Gettysburg Address: "this nation conceived in liberty"; and "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It partly rests on the extraordinary statement in the Gettysburg Address that this nation came into being four score and seven years ago—in 1776—when

it is so obvious that the colonies which rebelled in 1776 and sought to dissolve the bonds that tied them to Great Britain finally became the United States after the Constitution was drafted in 1787, after it was ratified in 1788, and only when George Washington took the oath of office as its first president in 1789.

Lincoln knew all these historical facts. Why then did he date the birth of this nation—its sovereign statehood—in 1776? That birth date was not something taken for granted by Lincoln, nor perfunctory for him. In his years of argument against the extension of slavery to new territories, Lincoln repeatedly appealed to the Declaration of Independence. His opponents resorted to the Constitution, with its covert references to the institution of slavery, as decisive for issues of policy regarding the extension of slavery. In effect, they took the adoption of the Constitution as the juridical birth date of the nation. Even that is incorrect, for it was not merely with the adoption of the Constitution that this nation came into being, but rather with its beginning to function in 1789 when Washington occupied the presidency and Congress assembled.

That the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address be regarded as the American Testament arose from the following considerations. To an astonishing and unprecedented degree, the United States was born out of sustained argument and grave political deliberation which committed this nation to a coherent political doctrine. That doctrine is set forth with an inspired brevity in a few momentous state papers—the first occurring at the moment of

this country's resolution for independence, the second at the moment of the new government's formation, and the third at the moment of the major crisis in our national history. Direct and concentrated inquiry into the truth of that doctrine should be a steady part of the American experience, and the basic propositions in it should be the object of sustained, disciplined public discussion, not only during the bicentennial celebration, but at all times.

To regard the three documents chosen for this purpose as constituting a testament attributes to them a character that calls for a special mode of interpretation—the kind of interpretation that the faithful give to scriptures they look upon as sacred. The assumption underlying the way in which Muslims read the Koran, Jews the Old Testament, and Christians the New Testament is that the text they are reading contains truths which they should make the most strenuous effort to discover by patient and careful exegesis. Such a reading is called "exegetical" because it tries "to lead out of" the text the truth assumed to be in it.

To approach the three documents that constitute the American Testament in this way does not require us to regard them as sacred scriptures or as revealed truth, nor indeed as the basis for any sort of "civil religion." There is a long tradition of commentary on secular writings in which the approach to the text being interpreted is analogous to the approach of the faithful to sacred texts. Medieval commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle—by Arabic Jewish, and Christian teachers—can be cited as examples of this method of reading a text for the purpose of discovering the truth it is supposed to contain. Modern examples are to

be found in the extensive commentaries on the writings of Immanuel Kant or Karl Marx.

With some variation in style, what is common to all these examples of exegetical reading, whether of secular texts or of texts regarded as sacred, is a method of interpretation that concentrates on the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, and on the relation between one element in the discourse and another, while paying little or no attention to contextual considerations or to psychological and sociological factors that may or may not have been responsible for the genesis of the texts being interpreted. An exegetical reading is concerned with philological aspects of the text, with the biography of its author, or with the historical circumstances under which it appeared only to the extent that these considerations contribute to an understanding of the text, not as affecting judgments about the truth of what is being said.

In sharp contrast to the exegetical method of reading a text is another method of commentary, which was called "the higher criticism" when, in the nineteenth century, it was first applied to the Old and the New Testaments. This method of interpretation is widely prevalent today, especially in the reading of political documents such as the ones chosen to be components of the American Testament. It makes little or no effort to get at the truth that the text being commented on may contain; it may almost be said to have no concern with the truth or falsity of what is being said in the document under consideration. Instead, the truth with which it is concerned is the truth about the document in question. To this end, it concentrates on the historical circumstances,

the sociological influences, and the psychological motivations that are thought to have determined its content.

These two methods of interpreting and commenting on the written word are thus seen to differ radically with respect to the truth with which they are concerned—the one with the truth in the document, the other with the truth about the document. This book offers its readers one approach to the three documents that are the subject of its three commentaries—the approach that has been called an exegetical reading of them. This by no means precludes the other approach, but it does require the reader to accept, even if only provisionally, the assumption underlying the approach made here; namely, that the three documents under consideration contain basic truths to be ferreted out by the most careful explication of the meaning implicit in the words of the text. On this assumption, the effort of the commentator—and of the reader as well—should be to arrive at as clear and explicit a statement of these truths as can be found.

EPILOGUE

There is an absence in our society today of statesmen or persons in public life of a caliber comparable to those who assembled in Philadelphia in 1787. Why, it may be asked, can we not find in a population so many times larger than the population of the thirteen original states a relatively small number who would be as qualified for the task as their predecessors?

I cannot give a satisfactory answer to this question except to say that the best minds in

our much larger population do not go into politics as they did in the eighteenth century. Perhaps the much larger number of citizens in our present population are not nearly as well educated. Their minds are not as well cultivated and their characters not as well formed.

Even if a second constitutional convention were to assemble statesmen of a character comparable to those who met in Philadelphia in 1787, and even if that second convention could be conducted under circumstances favorable to a good result, the resulting constitution would not find a receptive and sympathetic audience among our present citizenry, to whom it would have to be submitted for adoption.

They would not have the kind of schooling that enabled them to understand its provisions and to appraise their worth. The vast majority would not even be able to read intelligently and critically the kind of arguments in favor of adopting the new constitution that were written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, and published in current periodicals in the years 1787 and 1788.

A radical reform of basic schooling in the United States would have to precede any attempt by whatever means to improve our system of government through improving its Constitution.

That is also an indispensable prerequisite for making the degree of democracy we have so far achieved prosper, work better, or, perhaps, even survive.

We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can

save us from impending disaster. Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater.

* For your edification, this should be read or reread in conjunction with *The American Testament* found in issue # 36 at:

<<http://www.thegreatideas.org/millennium/tgio/tgio036.html>>

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I highly recommend "How to Think About The Great Ideas", an excellent resource by Mortimer J. Adler, edited by Max Weismann. When my copy first arrived, I spent over three hours reading the sections about my favorite ideas, and had to force myself to put it aside to get on with other work. This is a book to which you will continue to return in order to refresh your memory about the importance of the great ideas in your life. This book belongs in every serious thinker's personal library. Congratulations to Max Weismann for the fine job he did in editing this important work.

Jonathan Dolhenty, Ph.D., executive director of The Center for Applied Philosophy.

Max,

I just received in the mail today "How to Think About The Great Ideas".all I can say is—totally excellent.

Michael S. Casey

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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