

Ties that Bind
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To celebrate the 4th of July is to look back at the founding document that declared America's independence from the British and announced ideals for a new political community and to look ahead to what is possible in a free country. We are a people who are as diverse as we are similar. The diversity is apparent from what we see, hear, and experience daily, whether we are recently arrived in this country or are from families that have resided here for generations. Diversity in the best sense contributes to a rich life. Our similarity is signified by identifying as Americans, which makes us part of something greater than ourselves and our local community.

Abraham Lincoln, in a speech from 1858, spoke of those who came from Europe to settle in America, but who arrived after the founding era and thus had no direct connection to those who founded the new nation and no blood relations to them. He gave his speech a few days after the 4th of July but reminded his listeners that "we hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves—we feel more attached the one to the other and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit." The speech dates from a time when the nation was divided over the presence of slavery in the southern part of the United States, a contradiction of the announced principle of equality and the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The divisions that plagued the nation prior to the Civil War are similar to those that afflict Americans today. We are now in a time when some have as a goal to tear down the America that began in 1776. It is thus fitting to recall more of Lincoln's words that he spoke in 1858. "When they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,' and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are."

He continued. "That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world." Lincoln received loud and long applause as he uttered these sentiments. We, too, applaud these words because they point us to a means to overcome our divisions. The annual celebration of the 4th of July is one that reminds us that the nation's founding put us on a new footing. Our Founders rejected the society marked by a hierarchical British aristocracy ruled by a King and envisioned a government that would derive its just powers from the consent of the governed and that would secure the God-given rights with which all human beings are endowed.

Particular conditions have changed since 1776, but the universal electric cord that Lincoln identified in the Declaration unites us all, regardless of race, creed, or color, and points us in the direction of freedom.