



## July 4<sup>th</sup>, coronavirus, Black Lives Matter and Trump:

### What hidden secret of July 4th can save us?

By Alan N. Kay

Freedom is not free. How many times have you heard that before? And of course that's true, but that's only a start and a vast oversimplification. What is Freedom? What is its cost? How do we protect it? Are we losing it even now?

Freedom is complicated, messy, and even contradictory. From one crisis in America today to another our freedoms are under attack from the left and the right. We see liberals upset at President Trump for attacking free speech when he instructs the NFL to discipline Colin Kaepernick or when Trump threatens the "Black lives matters" protesters with military intervention. We see conservatives upset at what they call Government overreach of their freedoms when dealing with the coronavirus. We see the posts on Facebook, we hear the shouts in the media

and we wonder if Americans will ever agree again. Yet debating these issues is the essence of being an American and essential to a healthy free society. We grow as a people and as a society when we learn from each other's opinion. Unfortunately, as so many of us know, listening to each other's opinion is a rare commodity in 2020!

How then can the origin of that freedom, July 4th help us understand these issues and listen to each other? Is there anything we can learn from our founders? Is there anything they can teach us to help us with these difficult issues today? Most people of course say no. To the average American while July 4th commemorates our very first struggle to be free, it is not any more complicated than that. July 4th is about fireworks, barbecues and pool parties.

This could not be further from the truth. Indeed it is the opposite of the truth. If we can truly learn July 4<sup>th</sup>, if we can get past the fireworks and hot dogs to find the hidden secret within this story, America could grow perhaps like never before.

The freedom that we declared on July 4, 1776 was hardly simple or obsolete. It was a freedom that took more than five years to finally arrive, was in doubt until the very end and embroiled the nation in its first Civil War destroying livelihoods, families and friendships.

It was a freedom that came at the expense of freedom. It was complicated, paradoxical and could only have been achieved by denying that very same freedom to others. It was the core issue of the revolution. It was the issue that all of the founding fathers: Hamilton, Madison, Washington, Jefferson and especially Benjamin Franklin understood and mostly agreed on. It was an issue that meant their very survival. It was the issue of freedom of conscience.

Do we have the freedom of conscience? Do we have the right to believe what we want to believe, to live our life the way we want to live it? Of course we do! Every American would answer the question the same way. But what if your beliefs threatened the very freedom others wanted? What if you believed that George Washington was wrong? What if you were not sure? What if you were too busy taking care of your family that you did not want to pick a side? Could you disagree? Could you state your mind? Could you decide to think about it or sit this one out?

The answer of course was no! You could not sit this one out. You had to proclaim your loyalty to the United States government. State legislatures throughout the country passed what they called "Test Acts" that demanded people sign a

loyalty oath. Failure to do so could result in a fine, loss of property and even jail time. Self-appointed committees and chairmen gathered friends and neighbors together and enforced their will on other neighbors. Brother literally turned on brother and many times arguments ended in violence or even death. In addition, merchants, shopkeepers and smiths were forced to sell only to the rebels, paid in worthless paper money that spawned the phrase “not worth a continental”.

One can certainly understand the motivations and beliefs of some of these people who did not want to fight. Many of them had families they wanted to protect or support, many had been disgusted by the mob rule and tarring and feathering that they saw in the colonies and many others simply believed that the King of England was the legitimate ruler of their lands. It did not take long for them to earn the nickname, “Loyalists”.

And of course one can certainly understand the motivations of the state legislatures. Alexander Hamilton himself believed that more than 20% of the American population was active Loyalists and that another 50% were undecided while he and his friends were in the significant minority. Indeed there were so many Loyalists in New York that they had taken over the city and its

mayor was implicated in an assassination attempt of George Washington!

Do The ENDS justify the MEANS? After all this was war. They had to win and everything else was secondary. Or do you destroy the very principles you are fighting for when you take away those basic rights from your fellow American? These were the issues that Washington, Hamilton, Franklin and all the others had to wrestle with. They knew it was hypocritical. They heard the cries of neutrals and Loyalists saying that the rebels were merely replacing the tyranny of the king with the tyranny of the mob. How could you fight to defend freedom by taking it away from others?

So is it that simple? Did the END of establishing a free country justify the MEANS of taking freedom and property away from those who disagreed? Or is our nation built on hypocrisy? That is the awesome and powerful issue that defines American civilization. In understanding and debating the very essence of our original freedom, we get closer to understanding all the other Freedoms that come from it. When must freedom be compromised for the greater good? (Covid 19????)

So what did the founders think when it was all over? Were we right? Were we hypocrites? Did they even debate the issue like we debate so many of our issues today?

The short answer is yes. On one side of the debate was Alexander Hamilton who believed that once the war was over the Loyalists should be left to their own devices and that America should move on. He felt that “the world has its eye upon America... It remains for us to justify the revolution by its fruits.” In other words Hamilton believed that the best way to prove that he and his fellow revolutionaries were morally right in their revolution was to tolerate the freedom of conscience of the Loyalists and allow them to live in this new free society they had created. Quite a noble and lofty goal and even if we disagree with Hamilton, he certainly has a point. What better way to prove the value of freedom than to give it to those who were against it in the first place?

Unfortunately for the Loyalists there was another powerful founder on the other side of this debate and he had the means to do something about it. That man was none other than Benjamin Franklin. While never having been President or even fought in the Revolution, there is perhaps no man more respected during his lifetime and no man more admired today

than Franklin. Scientist, inventor, “favorite son of Philadelphia”, delegate to Congress and at the conclusion of the American Revolution chief negotiator with the British for the Treaty of Paris which would end the war and give us our freedom.

Franklin had a difficult task in front of him. The British government demanded compensation for these Loyalists. How would the rest of this mighty empire see its leadership if these people who had remained loyal to the King, who lost everything in that war to the rebels and were now exiles received nothing? If the British government could not protect these Loyalists then the empire itself could come crumbling down. So suffice it to say that the British need to help the Loyalists was a great one.

Franklin of course realized this and chose to ignore it. Why? Negotiations that should have ended much sooner dragged on for two years after the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. Indeed Franklin was taking so much time that the Congress came very close to dismissing him.

What then was Franklin’s position? How much did he disagree with Alexander Hamilton? To put it simply Franklin vehemently

refused to give any compensation whatsoever to any person who had remained loyal to the King during the war. He was so adamant that he insisted these people should be called “royalists” instead of Loyalists. The real Loyalists according to Franklin were the rebels who had remained loyal to the ideas of English freedom!

Can you hear the bitterness in Franklin’s voice? What was the cause of it? Why does he almost sound wounded by these Loyalists? Was there something else there? Was there something personal in all of this? Oh my friends hold onto your hats! For we are finally getting close to the hidden secret; the story that has kept July 4<sup>th</sup> buried in fireworks and simplicity is on its way!

We all know of Franklin the scientist, the inventor, the author, the statesman and the politician. But what do you know of Benjamin Franklin the man? Did you know he had children? Did you know that one of them was a bastard son named William? Did you know that Ben spent countless hours with William during his childhood? Indeed William was right there holding the kite with Benjamin during the most famous science experiment in American history.





***Why is the picture on the left the one everyone knows and not the picture on the right?***

And did you know that Ben got William his first job in the post office, that he traveled with William to London and helped him pass the bar exam there? Did you know he helped William become the governor of New Jersey?

Why does any of this matter? What's the big secret? Well it gets worse, especially for Benjamin. William not only did a superb job in his new career, he was determined to make his father proud and be an accomplished, respected royal Governor. Picking up on it yet? Yes, that is right, ***Royal*** governor. While father Ben was working with Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on declaring independence, his son William was adamant in publicly announcing his loyalty to the King. And as the war grew more desperate, William went on to actively work with British troops to defeat the rebellion! He organized other Loyalists; he started conspiracies and plots and

even attempted to organize his own Loyalist army that would be used against Washington. And when that plot failed and the rebels went on to win, what did William do? He represented the cause of the Loyalists and traveled to London to petition the King for aid! Ironically while William was in London meeting with the King to represent one side of the war (the losers), father Ben was in Paris representing the winners!

Again, why does any of this matter? Why should it have any impact on a debate regarding Loyalism and freedom of conscience? How can it help us today? It matters because Benjamin Franklin was also a human being. He was a father who had given everything to his son. He was a father who had dedicated his life to making sure that his son William would succeed in his own right. And how did William repay his father's dedication: By turning traitor to everything Benjamin had ever believed in and worked for! Indeed the way Benjamin himself said it in a letter to his son in 1785, his last one by the way, was that if William had achieved his ends the first one to be hung would be Benjamin himself!

Can any of us understand the total sense of betrayal Benjamin Franklin was feeling at the end of the revolution? He had been betrayed by his only remaining son. He was hurt, he was angry,

he was sick, and he was getting old. And if there was one last thing he would do in Paris it was to make absolutely sure that the Loyalists of America received nothing! Was this Benjamin Franklin's revenge for his son's betrayal or the practical workings of an American diplomat? You decide.

Eventually Ben succeeded. The Loyalists left the new United States with nothing. They had lost their farms, their homes, their friends, and their way of life. Indeed, most of them could only afford to go just a little ways north, to what the rebels had hoped would be the 14<sup>th</sup> state: Canada where hundreds of thousands of their descendants still live today.

The debate over the Loyalists was ended. Benjamin Franklin made sure of that. The world did not look at America with admiration as Alexander Hamilton recommended and desired. Instead Great Britain spent the next three decades waiting for its revenge (1812 anyone?). And the French, inspired by our own revolution, ended up turning to the dictator Napoleon instead. At home the Loyalists were forgotten. The story was forgotten. William Franklin was forgotten. (Who here knew before today that Ben was not alone with the lightning and the key?)

Worse still, the complex issues of freedom and morality that our Founding Fathers struggled with was also forgotten. In its place grew a new story that took on mythic, godlike stature as impressive as the faces carved into Mount Rushmore.

Eventually Americans saw the Founders not as men like ourselves who struggled every day with issues of freedom and made mistakes but as heroes who could do no wrong. That is one of the greatest losses of our wonderful birth from that July 4, 1776. We had the opportunity to learn how complex freedom can be; we had a chance to teach ourselves and our children that freedom is messy and sometimes paradoxical. We had the chance to teach our children in our schools how to balance these freedoms, to learn how to debate these freedoms with each other and in that learning also learn how to get along with each other. By making July 4th a simple story, by making life and freedom itself seem simple we lose the tools of debate and discussion and just end up yelling at each other from opposite ends of the extreme. Kind of sounds like today doesn't it? So the best way to honor July 4th is to honor the complexity of freedom, to discuss when it should be expanded and when it should be curtailed, to agree to disagree and to tell the full story with its highs and its lows, where there are no pure heroes and no pure villains, just pure people. And in that

telling we will better understand ourselves and each other.  
Have a happy July 4<sup>th</sup>!

Thanks for listening

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*(This story is from Alan N. Kay's History Cart. More info at <https://alannkay.com/>)*