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41. A July Fourth Oration (1800)

Source: **American Mercury** ***(Hartford, Conn.), July 10, 1800.***

From the earliest days of the new nation, July Fourth became a day of public commemoration. In 1800, a speaker whose name was not reported in the press delivered an Independence Day oration at Hartford, Connecticut. He celebrated the "universal principles" of the Declaration of Independence but chastised his fellow citizens for failing to live up to them fully. Like many other Americans, he rejoiced in the revolutions that, beginning

in France, had swept parts of Europe, predicted further progress for the Rights of Man in years to come, and identified the American example as the catalyst for the spread of freedom overseas.

On the other hand, the speaker condemned slavery as a flagrant violation of American values and a source of shame for the nation, asking pointedly, "Declaration of Independence! Where art thou now?" He went on to urge that "our daughters" ought to enjoy the same rights as "our sons," an idea that had been put forth by a few writers in the 1790s, but was quite unusual for the time. Overall, the speech offered both an illustration of American nationalism in the aftermath of the Revolution, and a telling commentary on the extent and limits of American freedom at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

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TO THE PRINCIPLES, the genuine, universal principles of the Declaration of Independence, we consecrate this day. Our festivity is not on account of the achievements of armies, nor merely because the seat of government is removed from London to Philadelphia, but because the American people have calmly and deliberately declared, that "all men are created equal," and in the presence of the supreme God have, in support of this declaration, pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

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Whatever may be the future fate of America, she has destroyed the Bastille, she has liberated Belgium, her principles have scaled the Alps, and inundated the plains of Italy, they have climbed the walls of Rome.... [Before] long Ireland shall take her harp... and shake the air with notes of liberty. Greece shall wake from her long slumber, some new Demosthenes shall plead the Rights of Man, while new Homers sing the triumphs of the free.... The Spanish monarchy totters at its base, exhausted by frequent wars, impoverished by a profligate administration. Farther degrees of colonial oppression will be the [attempted cure].... Then will the inward

burnings of colonial rage burst into a flame, then will the Rights of Man echo from Florida to Chile, and re-echo from Lima to St. Salvador. The principles of freedom will then be learned from those who now wield the scourge of slavery, the benevolent system of Jesus shall resound from the ruins of the . . . Inquisition.

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And thou, sable Ethiop! Suffering brother, let the principles of this day irradiate thy benighted countenance! Already has the voice of thy tears and blood reached heaven! . . . St. Domingo [has] seen thy race revenged, and their chains broken on the tyrants' heads.

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Citizens, my soul shrinks from herself, and startles at the name of Africa! Where we have heaped crime upon crime! Where we have excited murders, robberies, and burnings, that we might punish them in our own land with endless, hopeless slavery. . . . Declaration of Independence! Where art thou now?

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It is pleasing to turn from the contemplation of our inconsistencies, to the purity of our principles. The basis of the Declaration, from which the friend of his species hopes so much, is the Equality of Man. How the idea first got abroad, that men were not equal, is difficult to conceive, unless we refer the claim to the arrogance of power in the dark ages of the world. . . . The Equality of Man is the bond of our union and the constituted law of the land.

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Citizens, you must teach your children the principles of this day, and by the best education in your power to bestow, teach them to understand them. . . . But citizens, in this, as in all other things, if you do not begin well, you will never end well. Those principles of freedom, which embrace only half mankind, are only half systems, and will no more support the burden of humanity, than [a] section of an arch will support a column. Our daughters are the same relations to us as our sons, we owe them the same duties, they . . . are equally

competent to their attainments. The contrary idea originated in the same abuse of power, as monarchy and slavery, and owes its little remaining support to the same sophistry.

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What is liberty? Is it a something that men may keep without care and lose without injury? No citizens. Liberty is a tender plant, which wants the constant vigilance of its owner—he must weed and water, and defend it *himself;* hirelings may destroy it by carelessness, by accident, or by design, and once it withers, it is difficult to be restored.

The habits of men who have been [raised] under a monarchy ill comport with the simplicity of republicanism. It is not enough that we have a republican form of government, we must acquire a *republican mind.* We must be frugal, sober, industrious, self-dependent, privately and publicly hospitable. . . . We must eradicate national prejudices. . . . We must always remember that *men,* and not soil, constitute the state.

Questions

1. How does the speaker seek to persuade his audience of the evils of slavery?
2. What does the speaker identify as the major reasons to celebrate American independence?
3. Based on your reading of this document, do you think the speaker is expressing common or uncommon attitudes for this time?
4. What do you believe are the most important conflicts in early American society and politics raised by the speaker?
5. Identify ONE way the US Federal government addressed ONE of these conflicts during this time.