

Address by Gary T. Johnson at the 48th Annual Independence Day Celebration,
Chicago History Museum, July 4, 2007

(following the reading of the Declaration of Independence)

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation....”

I wonder if, like me, at the very beginning of the Declaration of Independence, you heard two phrases that seem to be in tension with each other – “When in the Course of human events it becomes *necessary for one people* to dissolve the political bands” and “*a decent respect to the opinions of mankind* requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

We are *one people*, we declare our independence because it is *necessary*. Nevertheless, we have a *decent respect to the opinions of mankind*. We may not seek the permission of others, but we *declare the causes*.

Did the Founders shed any light on this issue? Almost 50 years later, Jefferson wrote that the Declaration sought to "place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take."¹

There it goes again! The same tension: *place before mankind the common sense of the subject, ... command their assent, ... justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take*.

If we do what is *necessary for one people*, then why do the *opinions of mankind* matter to us at all? Those opinions matter because America is more than a nation, it is an idea. An idea not requiring the formal agreement of kings and tyrants, but an idea for all of humankind.

¹ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee (May 8, 1825), in THOMAS JEFFERSON, WRITINGS 1500 (Merrill D. Peterson ed., 1984).

It does not always happen, of course, that when we seek to justify ourselves, we succeed in commanding assent. That is not the case today, and that gives us pause.

So what do we do?

The world has changed since 1776. Our Declaration took root. There now are dozens of nations that subscribe to the ideas declared on that first Fourth of July.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg offers advice for our times:

“We live in an age in which the fundamental principles to which we subscribe -- liberty, equality, and justice for all -- are encountering extraordinary challenges. But it is also an age in which we can join hands with others who hold to those principles and face similar challenges.”²

We would be wise to heed Justice Ginsburg’s advice. The United States always must do what is *necessary* for us to do as a nation, but now, when we speak of the *opinions of humankind*, we are not the only democracy. There are others. Democracies face similar challenges, and we all must learn from each other during these extraordinary times if democracy is to survive.

² Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "A decent Respect to the Opinions of [Human]kind": The Value of a Comparative Perspective in Constitutional Adjudication." (Address to the American Society of International Law, April 1, 2005.) <http://www.asil.org/events/AM05/ginsburg050401.html>