

July 4th, The Declaration of Independence -- With a Russian Inspiration

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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Fireworks have long been part of the Independence Day celebrations in the United States. The Continental Congress specifically authorized a fireworks display for July 4, 1777 -- the first anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln thought that the meaning of the Declaration had been lost while “the fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day -- for burning fire-crackers!!!” Firecrackers would remain part of the tradition even as Lincoln would restore the first principle of the Declaration when he became President, namely: “that all men are created equal.”

Nearly two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, a new tradition for celebrating July 4 with fireworks was inaugurated. The cause was a marketing dilemma. Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler had become concerned about declining attendance for his outdoor summer concerts along the Charles River near downtown Boston.

The conductor and a wealthy friend came up with the idea to perform Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture -- complete with cannons, church bells, and fireworks -- in order to add a flamboyant touch at the end of the Independence Day concert. When the Pops donor asked about coordinating the cannon and the bells from nearby Boston churches at the end of the piece, the conductor told him not to worry: “We’ll just let all hell break loose.”

The 1812 Overture is famous for its rousing and emotional finale, but it is a curious composition to celebrate America’s independence. The piece had been quickly written by

Tchaikovsky to celebrate in 1872 the 70th anniversary of Russia's victory over Napoleonic France in 1812. The eccentric Russian composer disdained his own work, saying it was “loud and noisy” but lacked “artistic merit, because I wrote it without warmth and without love.”

On July 4th, 1974, Fiedler conducted the Boston Pops for its first July 4th performance of Tchaikovsky’s “loud and noisy” work. Two years later, a much larger crowd of 400,000 people gathered to celebrate the Bicentennial of America’s independence and to listen to the 1812 Overture. Millions more watched on national TV.

A tradition was born. Instead of music about the American Revolution (like “Yankee Doodle”) or about America’s own War of 1812 with the British (like the “Star Spangled Banner”), Americans increasingly used music designed to celebrate a Russian victory over Napoleon’s invading French armies -- the same French who were America’s allies in its War of Independence.

Independence Day has thus remained a great day for fireworks, but the meaning of the Declaration and its first principle, the equality of all people under the law must not be lost. In 1859, Abraham Lincoln had written some Boston leaders about the author of the Declaration of Independence and its American proposition: “that all men are created equal.” “All honor to [Thomas] Jefferson -- to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”

So, today, all honor to the Founders -- and to Abraham Lincoln who kept alive the principles of the Declaration of Independence, America's founding charter.

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