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This Day Belongs to Patriots

JOHN NICHOLS | President Bush may be visiting Monticello, but the sons and daughters of the revolution are protesting--and calling for Constitutional renewal.

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This Day, Like the Future, Belongs to Patriots

by John Nichols

As the 50th anniversary of America's revolution against colonialism and the divine right of kings approached, the author of the rebellion's founding document — still alive at age 83 — was asked to attend a July 4, 1826, celebration in Washington.

Alas, Thomas Jefferson could not make the journey from his beloved Monticello. The infirmity that had narrowed the great traveler's range would claim him (and his old rival John Adams), with an irony the the essential founder would have appreciated, on the anniversary itself.

But the invitation from Washington gave Jefferson an opportunity to speak one last time to the nation he and his contemporaries had forged into being.

And his counsel, as always, was not just to maintain the spirit of the '76 but to raise the banner of liberty higher so that all the world could rally to its promise.

May (July 4) be to the world, what I believe it will be, to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all: the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self government.

That form (of government) which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.

All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man.

The general spread of the light of science has already laid open, to every view, the palpable truth (that) the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the Grace of God.

These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

Remarkably, George Bush will visit Monticello on this, the 232nd celebration of the nation's revolt against a king named George.

Were Jefferson around, he would not be greeting Bush. The man who counseled that Americans would have to be ever on their guard against those who might turn the presidency into the tool of their "elected despotism" would surely be protesting not just the visit but the very notion of Bush's crudely constructed and violently executed presidency.

But, true to his nature, Jefferson would see those “grounds for hope” that he referred to in his last message.

Surely, he would have delighted in the advertisement in Thursday’s New York Times that announced “A Declaration for Our Times” — a variation on the Declaration of Independence that, in the spirit of the original document, rejects sacrifices of basic liberties in the name of security.

The declaration is signed by 500 individual Americans and organizations — including this writer — the who pledge support for fully restoring Constitutional rights and human rights in a United States steered dangerously off course during the Bush interregnum.

The Declaration is part of the Bill of Rights Defense Committee’s “People’s Campaign for the Constitution,” which has been launched to organize grassroots coalitions in communities across the country to demand that 2008 election candidates get serious about renewing rights that have been seriously undermined and threatened during the Bush-Cheney interregnum.

“Many Americans feel dispirited by the continuing array of freedom-robbing laws, policies, and government actions, including warrantless domestic spying, torture and unlimited detentions, which they see as un-American,” says BORDC director Nancy Talanian. “In this Declaration, we are calling out the administration for usurping our constitutional rights and committing ourselves to resolving our grievances through all lawful means available, as the founding fathers did.”

Talanian and the BORDC have been tireless champions of the Constitution in general and the Bill of Rights in particular during a period when the president and vice president have aggressively assaulted our liberties and when, for the most part, Congress has let them get away with it.

After the Patriot Act was passed in 2001 - with support from all but one senator, Wisconsin’s Russ Feingold — it was the BORDC that launched a nationwide campaign asking city, county and state governments to go on record for upholding the Constitutional rights of their citizens. Eight states and more than 400 communities acted, and members of Congress repeatedly cited the outpouring of support for the Bill of Rights when they addressed concerns about the Patriot Act.

But, Talanian admits, there is a big difference between getting the notice of responsible members of Congress and getting the United States to recommit itself to the cause of liberty that inspired our revolution against another King George.

Just as they did in the fall of 2001, the White House and its congressional allies are on this 222nd anniversary of America’s declaration of independence from kingly oppressions preparing a new assault on liberty. Instead to asserting aggressively and without apology that the 4th amendment to the Constitution guarantees a right to privacy, the Senate is by all accounts preparing to join the House in giving “legitimacy” to George Bush’s spying on Americans and immunity to the telecommunications corporations that assist his warrantless wiretapping schemes.

“It is an immeasurable tragedy that on July 4th, 2008, the United States Congress appears poised to pass a bill that would betray the spirit of July 4th, 1776, by radically expanding the president’s spying powers and granting immunity to the companies that colluded in his illegal surveillance program,” declares the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which signed the Declaration.

The privacy fight is just one of the many struggles that will only be resolved by electing a Congress that is committed to Constitutional renewal. And such a Congress will only be elected if the people demand a new direction.

“The people need to organize themselves locally and to meet with legislators and candidates face to face,” says Talanian. “After all, the US government was created to serve the people. Therefore, we need to set the government’s agenda and communicate to our representatives clearly that we are unwilling to accept suspensions of our liberties and of anyone’s human rights in exchange for our government’s promises of greater security.”

Those words may offend the sensibilities of despots, but they are poetry to patriots.

And this day, like the future Jefferson envisioned, belongs to the patriots.