Fourth of July at 250: The On-Going Struggle for Equality, Democracy, and Justice

written by Dan La Botz | July 4, 2026

I have written this essay because I have been irked by the media's discussion of whether or not our country has fulfilled the ideals of its founding fathers. So, I wished to clarify just what their ideals were.

The United States has been from the beginning the site of an enormous, long-drawn-out struggle between the wealthy property-owning ruling classes and the working classes. The ruling elite sought to expand its wealth and power and its control over other social classes, especially the laboring classes, and over time it built a powerful capitalist state and a vast empire. The laboring classes sought to gain economic and political power to improve their well-being and the prospects for their families. The conflict has been long, uneven, and intermittent, with periodic outbursts of struggle from below and episodes of reactionary repression from above. On July 4, our 250th birthday as a nation, we should celebrate the underdogs, the dissidents, the rebellious who fought and continue to fight against exploitation and oppression, and stand for equality, democracy, and justice.

Why the American Revolution?

The wealthy classes in the British North American colonies decided in the late eighteenth century that they no longer wished to share with Great Britain's monarch, nobility, and capitalist class the wealth that the colonial elites accrued from the exploitation of slaves and wage laborers and from the seizure of indigenous lands. The wealthy colonists objected to British political control of the colonies, to paying British taxes, and to British prohibition of colonial expansion into Indian territories to the West. The colonial ruling classes wanted to exploit the land and working peoples for their own benefit and didn't want to have to share that wealth with the British elite any longer. The time had come, the American wealthy classes believed to take it all for themselves. It was that avaricious desire that led to the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. They couched their demands in terms of freedom, of liberty, rhetoric that appealed to many people in the colonies, but those words meant freedom for themselves and their enterprises, the freedom to exploit and accrue profit.

The United States was born as twins that grew to be rivals like Cain and Abel. In the North, the rulers were capitalist farmers employing wage labor, commercial classes of merchants and traders, and already the very first industrial enterprises, textile mills employing women, children, and immigrants. In the South the rulers were the owners of plantations and slaves, a seigneurial class that dominated the system of plantation slavery dependent on English and American bankers and merchants both for investment and the sale of their product and the realization of a profit, but a distinct economic and social system. The two wealthy elites, representing the two systems, capitalism and slavery, struggled for control of the state from 1789 to 1861, when the Civil War broke out to determine who could control North America. Capitalism proved victorious and slavery was abolished. But we have gotten ahead of our story.

The colonial elites before the Revolution and while still under British rule had the experience in their respective colonies of republican forms of government, local assemblies and legislatures dominated by wealthy farmers and businessmen or slave owners, so it was relatively easy for them to envision a post-revolutionary government that would have similar characteristics. The revolutionaries, dominated by the wealthy property owners and their lieutenants, lawyers and journalists, created a series of such a national republican government, first the As the Continental Congress (1776-1761), then the Confederation (1781-1789) and finally the United States government established by the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, a federal republic, representing a compromise between the capitalists and the slaveocracy.

The Founders' Struggle against Democracy

The American "Founding Fathers" worked to prevent the rise of democracy which they feared and loathed. Alexander Hamilton argued that democracy meant "mob rule;" it was "a disease." He wrote that, "The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right." Elbridge Thomas Gerry, a merchant who was one of the Founding Fathers, stated that, "democracy was the worst of all political evils." James Madison, one of the key intellectuals and political leaders, wrote in the Federalist, No. 10 that pure democracies have historically been "spectacles of turbulence and contention," so a form of government to be avoided at all cost.

The anti-democratic views of the founders were embodied in the U.S. Constitution which ignored or excluded more than half the population. Women, who made up almost half of the population (48.8%) were politically non-existent, with virtually no rights whatsoever. The Black slaves who comprised almost one-fifth of the population (18.8%) had no rights either. Nor did the Indians who made up 7% of the population. That is, the vast majority of the population were not really citizens. At the time of the establishment of the United States, he states, which determined who would be allowed to vote, generally established property requirements based either on landownership or wealth. Only Vermont had no such requirements. The wealthy white men who founded the country not surprisingly made it a wealthy, white man's republic.

The Constitution theoretically established three co-equal branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—from the beginning the presidents played a dominant role. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk and others in the early republic usurped power in the interests of expanding the authority of their class and the power of the state. Andrew Jackson, for example, defied the Supreme Court and supported Georgia in expelling the Cherokee Indians. In the legislative branch, the Senate was not initially democratically elected by the people but rather senators were chosen by state legislatures. The Supreme Court, whose members were appointed for life by the president and confirmed by the Senate, wielded enormous power. Only the House of Representatives was directly elected by "the people," which at the time meant by white men who had property.

The People's Fight for Equality, Democracy and Justice

While the capitalist and slavocracy ruling classes strove to keep all power in their own hands, from the beginning working people, and those oppressed because of their race or because of their female sex, fought for equality, democracy, and justice. We cannot even begin to mention all of the battles between the country's founding and today, but it is worth mentioning one of the first because it set the pattern. In its first years, the U.S. government imposed a tax on whiskey to pay the costs of the revolutionary war. In 1791-94, farmers in Western Pennsylvania refused to pay the tax and some 500 of them armed themselves and revolted against the tax collectors. President George Washington and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, to make clear the power and the purpose of the new government, personally lead an army of 2,000 troops to crush the farmers' rebellion. In the South, slave rebellions, Gabriel Prosser's conspiracy of 1800, Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy (1822), Nat Turner's Rebellion (1831), were violently suppressed, their leaders and many participants executed.

American history subsequently became a history of petitions, protests, and rebellions to which we owe whatever limited equality, democracy, and justice that we have achieved. The first wave feminists of Seneca Falls (1848) and the women's suffrage movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, won political and economic rights for women, including the right to vote in 1920. The abolitionist movement and the Civil War (1862-65), the brief period of Black Reconstruction (1867-77), and the civil rights movement of the 1950s-60 finally won political rights in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And the great labor strike wave of the 1930s won for workers the rights to union recognition, to bargain collectively, to negotiate labor union contracts in the National Labor Relations Act (1935). None of these rights were won fully, completely, or permanently, but the passage of laws embodying them represented a step forward. The persistence of the capitalist system, entwined with racism and sexism, prevented us from fully achieving those goals of equality, democracy and justice. So, we must also struggle for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of democratic socialism.

The Struggle Continues Today

On July 4, 2026 working people and the oppressed still face a capitalist ruling class, but one that evolved, posing new threats. Our country has become an oligarchy with an authoritarian political system. Fascism, some sort of neofascism, has become a real possibility.

Today's leading capitalists come from the high-tech industries developed in Silicon Valley and now spread throughout the country. The latest development, Artificial Intelligence (AI), threatens to reorganize our economy, our military, and our political system. Climate change, particularly global warming, driven by the coal and petroleum industries, threaten both agriculture and industry, and the lives of millions on this hottest Fourth of July ever. And America's imperial adventures in Iran may lead to other conflicts, which could bring about the use of nuclear weapons by nuclear powers such as Israel, Russia, China or the United States. All of this on top of the continuing exploitation of working people and the oppression of people of color and women in our own country.

We should on this July Fourth be proud of the No Kings demonstrations, of the Fighting Oligarchy rallies, but also of every small civic protest, every little strike, every group small or large that stands up against the corporations, against the government, and thus fights for themselves and for all of us below. If we see things this way, then I think we can say, Happy Fourth of July.