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Peter H. Gibbon

Worthy of Praise

In 1776 John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, about Independence Day: "It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore." Fifty years later—on Independence Day in 1826—Adams died in Quincy, Mass. His last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives." Adams was unaware that hours earlier Jefferson had died at Monticello, whispering to his doctors, "Is it the Fourth?"

That our second and third presidents should die on the 50th anniversary of the declaration they had both signed struck most Americans at the time as evidence of a divine plan for the young nation. On the same day, a 26-year-old teacher stepped up to a lectern in the meetinghouse of Northampton, Mass., and delivered his first public oration. As he spoke in the afternoon heat, George Bancroft did not know that two of his heroes had just died. Later, he too was to see the hand of God guiding that July day.

Bancroft's speech was celebratory. His subject: the advantages of American democracy. He described cultivated fields and busy wharves. He talked about the importance of immigration and equality. He praised a free press and religious liberty, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

George Bancroft left teaching and went on to become the preeminent historian of the 19th century. When Abraham Lincoln died, it was Bancroft who delivered the main eulogy

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One hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, America displayed its technological potential at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876. Bancroft was there. He was 76 years old. The gigantic steam engine and primitive telephone seemed revolutionary. Today he would be stunned by an array of American inventions: automobiles, airplanes, radios, televisions, computers, air conditioners. And he would discover that American engineers set the pace in technology.

Like Adams and Jefferson, Bancroft was a man of learning. He would be fascinated by DNA, the neutrino, the human genome and the mapping of the universe, and proud that our scientists win most of the Nobel Prizes.

The son of a Congregational minister, Bancroft would be interested in our values. He would see that with all our possessions, we retain the Puritan work ethic; that despite the increase in scientific knowledge, most Americans remain religious. He would find that we are still a nation of opportunity—that we encourage entrepreneurs, respect achievement and reward excellence.

He would appreciate thousands of voluntary associations and foundations that dispense billions of dollars. Beneath our rhetoric of a flawed America, he also would find thousands of good Samaritans quietly serving their communities. He would discover that many want to come to America; few wish to leave.

Bancroft lived in a century of reform, when the Fourth of July was an occasion for serious oration on subjects like temperance, peace, abolition and women's rights. He would celebrate our diversity and increased tolerance and find progress in equality for women, African Americans, Native Americans and the disabled.

Early in his Northampton speech, Bancroft talked about the importance of an educated citizenry. At that time few Americans attended high school. With pride he could point to these figures: Today more than 65 million Americans are enrolled in school, and more than a quarter of our population graduates from college.

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in front of a grieving Congress. Bancroft founded the Naval Academy at Annapolis and served as secretary of the Navy and minister to Great Britain and Germany. In 1891, when Bancroft died, President Benjamin Harrison ordered the flags flown at half mast. From his Mathew Brady photograph, he stares out at us: slender, vital, serene and confident—from another age, one that believed in progress, patriotism and heroes.

Bancroft was a triumphalist. Triumphalism sees American history as a march toward goodness and greatness and believes in growth and material progress. The triumphalist also believes that great people make a difference.

Today revisionism has become dominant in our schools and culture. Revisionism is most interested in mistakes and failures, indifferent to religion, and suspicious of greatness. Magnified are the sins and shortcomings of American history and its heroes. It would have been better, say the revisionists, if Washington had been more democratic, Lincoln less racist, Theodore Roosevelt more peaceful, Woodrow Wilson less moralistic and Franklin Roosevelt less devious. History is driven forward not by heroes, but by geography, chance and greed.

In a revisionist age, what might George Bancroft, the triumphalist, find to celebrate about America on the Fourth of July?

As a boy, Bancroft hacked all day at the hard soil on his parents' farm in Worcester, Mass. He would celebrate supermarkets, fast food and the fact that a few million farmers now feed an entire nation as well as hungry people around the world.

Bancroft watched his young wife and 2-year-old daughter die. Like many Americans, he was familiar with cholera, dysentery and childbed fever. He would celebrate antibiotics, uneventful pregnancies and longer lives.

A Polaris submarine was named after George Bancroft in 1965. Bancroft could not have foreseen submarines. Even less could he have imagined America's military power, influence in world affairs and ascendance at the end of the 20th century.

John Adams hoped that Independence Day would be a cause for celebration. Throughout the 19th century, Americans saved the day to dedicate their grandest projects. On Independence Day in 1817, New York Gov. DeWitt Clinton dug the first sod for the Erie Canal. In the nation's capital, President James Polk presided over the laying of the 24,500-pound cornerstone of the Washington Monument on July 4, 1848. France officially presented the Statue of Liberty to America on July 4, 1884. In her left hand, the statue holds a law book inscribed "July 4, 1776."

As a triumphalist, George Bancroft felt that America had much to celebrate, but he was not naive. He was familiar with selfishness and greed. He witnessed the carnage of the Civil War, the acrimony over Reconstruction and hostility to immigrants. A historian committed to objectivity, he would find flaws in contemporary America. He would deplore increasing economic inequality. He would be shocked by popular culture. He would be distressed by disintegrating families.

Still, on this day of celebration, he would be puzzled by our pessimism. He would question our casual denigration of past and present heroes and our disregard for progress. He would wonder why, with all our comfort and leisure, we are not content. He would remind us, as he did in his speech on the Fourth of July in 1826, that America has been favored. And he would wonder why we are not grateful.

The writer is a research associate in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.