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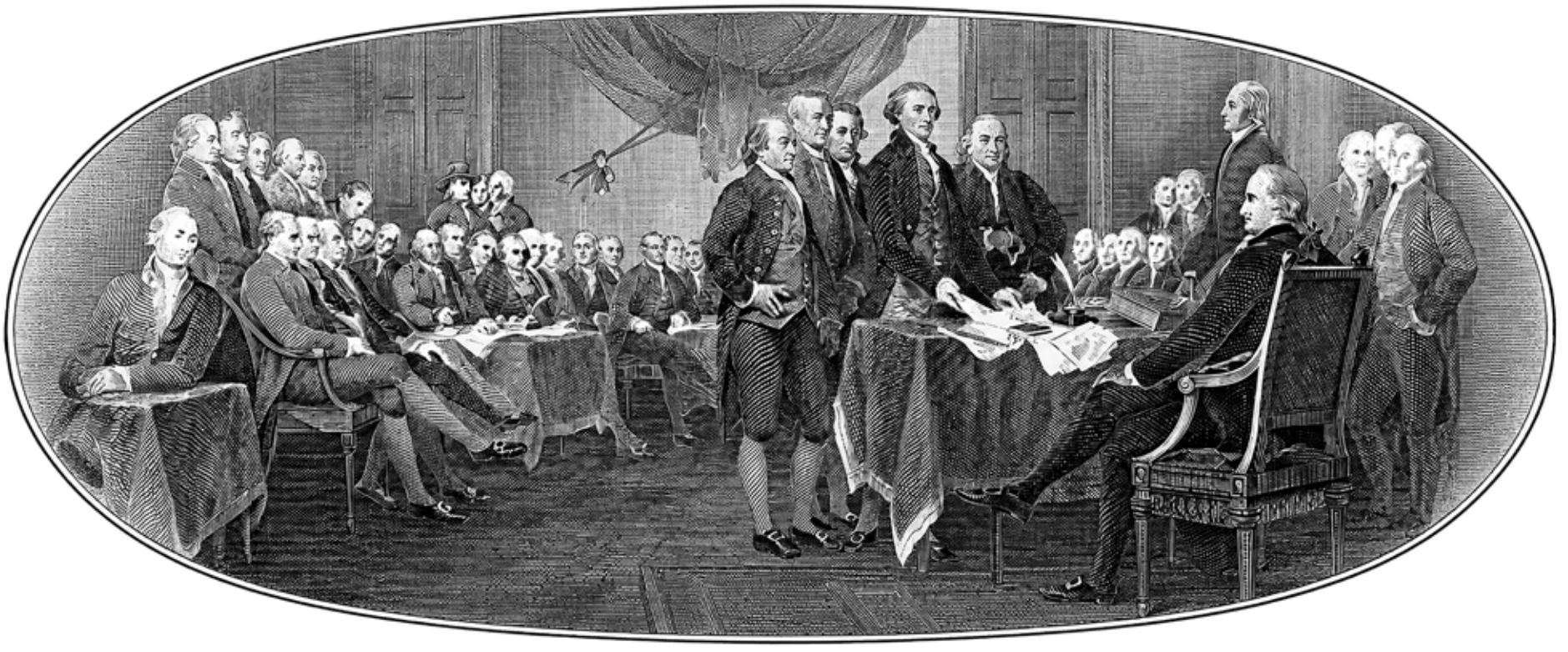

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Clarence Thomas's Birthday Present to America

by Charles R. Kesler

America 250 is the official name for the approaching commemoration of the 250th anniversary of America's founding—not to be confused with Freedom 250, the Trump Administration's public-private partnership designed more or less to do the same thing. To add to the confusion, both refer to themselves as celebrating the country's "semiquincentennial," a Latinate word that may never have been used in historic Latin, meaning basically half-way-to-500. That's an optimistic way to calculate it. Few republics have lasted 500 years (Rome was the most famous example, though it soon became an empire), and America is not one of them, at least yet. But it is not as optimistic as my friend Jeff Anderson and a few others, who prefer to refer to the approaching milestone as the "quarter-millennial." Yes, we may be a quarter of the way to being a thousand-year republic…yet that leaves a very long way to go.

All these impressive-sounding words date the American Founding from the moment that the Second Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence. Richard Henry Lee's resolution of independence was approved by Congress on July 2 and the Declaration on July 4, though it was not formally signed until early August. The Declaration is of course older than the U.S. Constitution, which was drafted in 1787 and ratified by the required nine states in 1788, when the first elections were held under its auspices. The remaining states did not make approval of the Constitution unanimous among the original states until 1790—236 years ago. Although the U.S. effectively ceased to be ruled by a monarch in 1776, it did not guarantee a republican form of government to all the states until the Constitution's "guarantee clause" took effect in 1788 or 1790, depending on how you look at it. Under the Articles of Confederation, proposed in 1777 and ratified unanimously by the state governments in 1781—our first attempt at a federal constitution—the Confederation forbade titles of nobility, but that was about as far as an explicit guarantee of republican government had gotten.

American history is complicated, in other words, and it's probably a safe bet that Americans don't understand it as well as we used to. The opening act of Freedom 250 was the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) cage match on the White House lawn on June 14, which happened to be Flag Day and, oh yes, Donald Trump's 80th birthday. His long life carries us back almost a third of the way to the Constitution and even to the Declaration. The nation is still young, even if the president isn't.

Trump's critics and probably many of his supporters will abhor the UFC gig; it will strike them as suspiciously Roman, or at least as Roman as a spectacle could get without a magistrate giving the ultimate thumb's up or thumb's down. Still, we forget how often young Abraham Lincoln wrestled and fought harum-scarum with his young friends on the Illinois frontier. In the "rough-and-tumble" fights of that day, pulling hair, breaking bones, and gouging eyes were common moves, though Lincoln didn't indulge in them and was reportedly strong enough to enforce his high-minded rules on his opponents. He was a kind of gladiatorial lawgiver.

Aside from the UFC contest, the best birthday gift the American people are likely to receive on their country's 250th is Associate Justice Clarence Thomas's speech last April 15 at the University of Texas at Austin. Speaking at the university's new School of Civic Leadership, Thomas devoted the occasion to describing a crisis in American civic education, a crisis that the new school—not to mention, the welcome wave of similar civics institutes popping up in Red state universities across the land—is designed to ameliorate. The crisis, as Justice Thomas explained, arose from two general causes, one practical or moral, and the other, intellectual.

As a young black man who grew up in the segregated South, Thomas couldn't avoid seeing the difference between just and unjust laws, as well as the ability of unjust laws and majorities to stymie civic principles. He came to the conclusion that as important as the Declaration's endorsement of "all men are created equal" was, the more telling sentence was the Declaration's final one, the signers' pledge to each other of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." It was that "supreme act of courage," their "willingness to die for the principles they were asserting," Thomas said, that made all the difference.

Why are moral clarity and resolution so lacking? Thomas pointed next to the intellectual sources of our decline in civil courage, primarily the confusion that attended "the new set of first principles" introduced by American Progressives at the turn of the 20th century. It was that argument, long familiar to this magazine's readers, that drew his progressive critics' ire and incredulity in, e.g., *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker*. They hate to be reminded that racial and ethnic discrimination was once thought the vanguard of Progressive politics, and on many campuses in America, still is.

On America's 250th, let us be thankful for Justice Clarence Thomas, that great and good man; for our country's longevity and freedom; and for the gathering revival of American civic spirit.