



America: Conceived in liberty derived from our maker

By Jim Waters

Where does freedom come from anyhow?

That's a good question for Kentuckians to ponder as they surfeit on hot dogs, slurp down whatever it is they slurp down and "ooh" and "ah" mindlessly as fireworks explode above this Fourth of July.

Along with these traditions, why not add to your revelry some education and entertainment that focuses on this question? Watch at least the first episode in a new HBO-produced series on "John Adams," based on David McCullough's recent book on the second president.

The critically acclaimed series doesn't mask in Hollywood glitter the foibles of America's early leaders. Like Scripture, it fleshes out - sometimes in painful detail - the flaws of patriots who sought not the worship of subjects but fought for the right to liberty and self-determination for all.

Sometimes they even fought with each other. They wrestled over what kind of country to form. They waged vicious ideological battles concerning how much power the central government would wield and how to best enhance America's standing in the world.

But they agreed on this core principle: Government doesn't grant freedom or bestow our liberties. It's supposed to protect them.

In the HBO production, Adams strikingly illustrated this while accepting a nomination to become a representative to the First Continental Congress.

"Let it be known," Adams bellowed from a church pulpit to an audience that included the Sons of Liberty, "that British liberties are not the grants of princes or parliaments; that many of our rights are inherent and essential ... We have a right to them derived from our maker."

That quote probably disrupts the psyche of history's revisionists and perhaps some Darwinists or ACLU lawyers. Many of them, I suppose, would have us believe that our freedom originates in Frankfort or Washington.

It doesn't. The right to assemble, worship, petition government and write a weekly column like this one didn't even come from Adams and his fellow patriots. In fact, their greatness stems from recognizing themselves as guardians - not givers - of liberty. The truths they sought to protect via the Constitution and its Bill of Rights were indeed, "self-evident."

To them, it was "evident" that "all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Politicians claim to believe this. Their actions often say otherwise.

Rather than limiting their role to defending the access of all to grab hold of their God-given liberties and determine their course, too many politicians believe they make the best arbiters of that course. They usurp individual responsibility and take from those who earn and give it to those who refuse to exercise their God-given rights and access freedom's opportunities.

Such thinking would have led to tar and feathering in the days of Adams. Just ask the customs officers who tried to force the colonists to unload, buy, drink - and pay a tax on - British tea. Finally, those colonists dumped that high-tariff bearing tea into the bay, fueling the passion for liberty. Those acts culminated in a ragtag army defeating the world's most powerful political and military force.

It led to the creation of, as a president born in Kentucky would say, "a new nation, conceived in liberty."

Our founders pledged their lives and fortunes to protect and advance the freedom we enjoy today. And they did so - as they noted in the Declaration of Independence - "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence."

Yes, the effort expended on July 4 to celebrate the work of these men comes with a lot of bang. But the endeavor in the halls of government to emulate their courage, independence and sacrifice fizzles badly.

Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. You can reach him at jwaters@bipps.org. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.