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A Birthday, But A Happy One?

The first shot in the War of American Independence was fired in April 1775 at the Bridge of Concord near Boston, opening a revolutionary war. Emerson said that "this shot was heard around the whole world", and Longfellow asserted that "it shall echo for evermore". But in spite of all the later poetical exaggerations, the action at Concord did not signify that the dice had already been cast forever, because as late as the summer of 1775, the majority of the Continental Congress at Philadelphia did not dream of separation from the motherland and sent a conciliatory message to the King. That on July 4, 1776, the Congress, at last, adopted the Declaration of Independence drafted by Jefferson, was due to the activities of the "Founding Fathers", a small coterie of determined men, among whom was also Benjamin Franklin. Their ideas were based on the notions of John Locke about the functions and the boundaries of State Power, as laid down in his "Two Treatises on Government". Not forgotten as one of the founding fathers must be, of course, George Washington, the first commander-in-chief and Union President, with his military talents and his toughness, capably supported by liberal subsidies and direct military aid of foreign allied powers, to whom the survival of the, originally weak, Union was entirely due until 1783, when Britain signed the Versailles Treaty that recognized the independence of the thirteen former colonies.

The United States is now celebrating its 200th birthday. Its age is puny compared with the millennia through which we know of the development of Asian and European nations, but two hundred years during which a written constitution has never suffered an attempt of overthrowing it by force but has only been partly rewritten by free consent and peaceful evolution are a highly respectable age. During these two hundred years, entire empires have fallen to pieces, and revolutions have completely changed the faces of whole continents and carved them up into new states. Nevertheless, the USA has not entered the year of its 200th anniversary in a feeling of high elation. It begins the third century of its life in a state of demoralization, which seems quite incompatible with its capacity and its power.

In 1951, when the USA celebrated the first 175 years of its existence and independence, every-

thing had looked quite different. Then, the United States was generally recognized as the most powerful nation politically, economically and militarily. People believed to live in the "American Century", they believed in the "American Way of Life" and in their task to make the world "safe for Democracy". Since then, we, and the Americans, have gone through the tragedies of Vietnam and of Watergate. Racial hostility, rising criminal delinquency, inflation, mass unemployment, and drug addiction have proven to be problems that can hardly be overcome. It is true without question that Watergate was a monster scandal but that is not proof that every politician is corrupt; it is clear that many mistakes were committed in the Vietnam campaign but this does not mean that the United States would be happiest without any foreign policy whatever, as a great number of Congressmen seem to believe. Watergate has plunged into the limbo of the past; the sickness of Vietnam has been overcome, the revolt of American youth and racial hatred seem to have been reduced to a bearable level, yet the United States is finding new and endlessly repeated reasons for exhibitionist, self-accusatory depressive phases of its collective mind.

Among the weaknesses of any democracy with a freely elected parliament and a free press there are inevitably such inclinations to extremist, irrational fluctuations of moods. Already Alexis de Tocqueville, "one of the greatest analysts of the political world" who, as one of the first persons, predicted the future roles as superpowers of the United States and of Russia, had a clear mind about the implicit risks and dangers of any democratic development. Yet, though we meet now many Americans who have started to doubt that their history can continue to develop consistently and without violent breaks, and who lose their traditional belief that good will is sufficient to be able to overcome all national and international problems, the United States is a strong and young nation which is able to give birth to forces that will regain for itself selfconfidence and among its friends the belief in its reliability. It is specifically due to the existence of a *free* parliament and of a *free* press that the will to uphold liberty and to defend it will be retained by people, or — as Thomas Paine stated: "These are the times that try men's souls." *Hubert Höping*