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David R. Gillie: The Test: An Independence Day Observance

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by [Elias Alias](#) , [July 4, 2015](#)

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[Editor's Note: Oath Keeper David R. Gillie, who, until the death of his wife, served as our Vice-President for Military Affairs, delivered these remarks on Independence Day last year upon Gettysburg National Battlefield. We share it this Independence Day in the desire that rereading it will make us all better citizens and contribute to Oath Keepers' mission of united Americans – Public Servants and Private Citizens, under Law.

Elias Alias, editor]

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THE TEST

Capstone Address

Independence Day Observance

Eternal Light Peace Memorial
Gettysburg National Battlefield
4 July 2014

David R. Gillie ©

On Independence Day, 2014, approximately five hundred Americans from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, and other States met at the foot of the Eternal Light Peace Memorial (<http://www.gettysburg.stonesentinels.com/Other/Peace.php>) on Gettysburg National Battlefield to celebrate American Independence, to honor those who fell at Gettysburg, and to strike a chord for racial reconciliation between black and white Americans. Mr. Gillie's remarks immediately preceded the laying of a wreath at the foot of the Memorial.

Good afternoon, Americans!

O, how we love that word!

I *am* the first American citizen in my family. From my boyhood, I have burned with a desire to measure up to the stature of an *American*, in the fullest sense of that wonderful word. I still burn, and I'm still trying.

In case you've seen that great movie about the *Lost Battalion* in World War I, I will note that I'm a little like private Krotoshinsky.

You New Yorkers may remember the story of Private Abraham Krotoshinsky. Skinny, undergrown, practically just off the boat from Russian Poland (1), he enlists in the Army (2). Along with some 600 Irish, German, Jewish, Polish, Italian, Greek, and Russian roughnecks from the East Side—all proud to call themselves Americans—he is assigned to the 308th Battalion, 77th Division. During a major offensive in the Argonne, the 308th is the only Battalion in a battle line of three Divisions to take and hold its assigned objective, and so finds itself cut off for six days, surrounded and under relentless enemy fire, deep within Imperial German lines.

Private Krotoshinsky eventually plays a heroic role in guiding relief forces to rescue his surviving comrades of the Lost Battalion. But that's not why I mention him. If one had to be a hero to be an American, there'd be little hope for me or for many of you. Rather, it's a snippet of dialogue from the film that moves me and, I hope, moves you, too. It's probably fictional, but it points up the beautiful, honest-to-God truth of who these guys understood themselves to be.

A comrade: How come we have to use these French guns?

Krotoshinsky: We are *Americans*. We should have *American* weapons.

Lipasti: You're *not* American, Krotoshinsky.

Krotoshinsky: Sure, I am. I took the Test.

Lipasti: What Test?

Krotoshinsky: The one they give you at Ellis Island. Didn't you take it?

Lipasti: I didn't *have* to take a Test. I'm good looking. Besides that Test doesn't make you *American*; it makes you a *civilian* so that they could draft you and then send you here.

Krotoshinsky: Heh! Heh I'm here, 'cause I'm an American.

Lipasti: You're a Polack.

Krotoshinsky: Only in America am I a Polack. In Poland, I'm a Jew who has to live in the shtetl and make boots for the cavalry officers. I took the Test,

Lipasti: You know what they said?

They said I could be anything I want. Don't you ever say I'm not an American. I took the Test.

We all take the Test. Only it's not on paper. It's not *necessarily* on a battlefield. It's in our hearts, in the truths that we have the courage to believe, or are too cowardly to believe, in how we fulfill the duties of citizenship in our generation.

The American Founders were the first to take the Test. They *wrote* the Test. It's in the second paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence*, that statement of five truths that make up the *Creed* of the *American Civic Religion*. There was a day—the American Day—when we unanimously held those truths to be self-evident. Recall them with me, won't you:

- That all men are created equal,
- That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,
- That among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,
- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,
- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

If you and I understand and believe each of the *Declaration's* five truths as stated, and if we view and fulfill our civic duties accordingly, then we pass the Test. If we do not, we are not yet Americans in the only meaningful sense of that word, and Independence Day remains for us merely so many hot dogs and fire crackers.

A vital feature of the Test is that name and descent are of no consequence. Your name may be Smyth, Ratcliffe, or Rolfe, and your family may have been here since Jamestown. Your name may be Bradford, Alden, or Hopkins and

your family here since Plymouth. Still, it is possible that you may fail the Test. On the other hand, your name may be Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Alan Keyes, or David Manning, and your family may have come here in chains. Or your name may be Krotoshinsky, Wong, or Gillie, and you may be just off the boat. Yet, if you understand and believe the *Declaration's* truths, and fulfill your civic duties with regard to them, you are—as Lincoln assured us—blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the greatest Americans who ever lived.

Naturally, the first Americans never claimed to have dreamed up the Test themselves. Almighty God had put it into their hearts to believe these liberating, but challenging, truths.

Writing retrospectively in 1818, John Adams asked,

*But what do we mean by the American Revolution?
Do we mean the American war? The Revolution
was effected before the war commenced. The
Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people;
a change in their religious sentiments of their duties
and obligations.(3)*

Adams then described in his wonderful essay how God had stacked the deck in this Promised Land, bringing to these shores those who loved God and Liberty best, then coaxing and schooling them over 150 years until they were ready to understand and believe the *truths* of the *Declaration*, and to govern themselves as no other people has before or since.

That's how He invented Americans.

Oh, and one more thing about the Test. Each of us takes it individually. But, if a large portion of the class doesn't pass with us, we *all* fail together. Citizenship being something that you *do with* fellow citizens, if we can't teach, conciliate, persuade, and be persuaded by enough of our fellow citizens to be Americans, together, we still fail the Test.

Those first Americans who wrote the Test were the first to pass it, too. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in support of their *Declaration*. They defended their Independence, their Union, and the world's only free country, with their all against the implacable force of the day's mightiest empire. They held together as Americans until God crowned their sacrifice with peace. And they framed and adopted a Constitution that *largely* accorded with the requirements of their *Declaration* Test.

That word *largely* reminds us that, though they passed the Test, those of the Founding Generation did not ace it. In their fateful failure to root out the black slavery that mocked their *Creed*, they left in place that Rock of Offense upon which the ship of their Republic would crack and almost founder three and a half generations later.

Why *did* that ship run aground and almost sink? Because the Test did not go away, nor change in the least particular, for their descendants. Indeed, how could it?

In our most trying national examination, the entire American family was made to wrestle in the papers, parlors, pews, and pulpits of America as civil war loomed ever nearer. When those of that generation failed their test, God scheduled a retest, and they were made to slaughter each other on a hundred battlefields like this one for four terrible years. And, of course, the several hundred thousand brave men—so much better than I—who struggled here at Gettysburg, and the scores of thousands who here laid down their lives and limbs, were acting out a vital point, a turning point, in that generation's taking of the test.

Did they finally pass the Test?

Well, the fact that we've chosen to celebrate Independence Day on *this* spot is evidence of our assessment that they did. And yet they left a challenge for those of us who came after. What was our task? Surely not to hallow the ground that they had already made holy, but, rather—as Lincoln taught us—to deepen and purify, at the flame of their holy sacrifice, our *own* devotion to the American cause of self-government.

So that we could pass the Test in our generation.

Because the Test has not changed for us, any more than it did for the dead whom we will honor here today. It cannot change, and it will not change.

So, how are *we* doing?

Not well, I fear.

Our increasing indifference to and estrangement from the *Declaration's Creed* has left us alarmingly less free today than any previous generation in America. To make matters worse, a century of civic sloth has left us woefully far from being the one united people that God surely intends us to be.

Conciliation, then, is the special order of our day. We must come to recognize in each other sons and daughters of our common Heavenly Father, fellow citizens, and friends. We must see more truly our own faults and acknowledge them to each other, forgive faults in each other, and persuade and help each other to do better. We *all* must pass this Test, become Americans again, together, or we will all fail together.

In this regard, I salute the great work being done by Oath Keepers for five years and counting. No other association of Americans is working urgently, but prudently, in Oath Keepers' unique fashion, to conciliate the Officers of our State and General governments to each other and to their fellow citizens and rightful masters, and to renew their due subordination to the Rule of Law, by celebrating and reinforcing the oaths to support our constitutions that are the lawful conditions of their service.

I salute Pastor Manning's noble and ennobling vision and the hundreds who have answered his call today to lay a wreath at the foot of this monument and to pray for peace and reconciliation between citizens who have often failed in their duties of men and fellow citizens to each other, and so have failed the American Test.

Imagine, if every public servant in our country, in both our State and our General Governments, were an Oath Keeper, not merely an Oath Taker! What if we had thousands of congregations like Atlah, asking not "Who is to blame that we are strangers to each other?" but "What can we do to become united Americans?"

I wish God had not taken Lincoln from us so soon. For he was—from his earliest lawyering days until his *Second Inaugural Address*, delivered mere weeks before his death—the greatest Conciliator of Americans to each other that we have ever had. If he were here today, could he not show us how to teach, conciliate, persuade, and be persuaded by each other, to be Americans, together?

As I was pondering this question recently I posed it to a few friends. One friend and a great American answered with the words of the prophet Micah. This is entirely appropriate, and I have no doubt Lincoln would approve. None of our Presidents, in his private and public words and deeds, more thoroughly and authentically breathed the spirit of the Bible than he did.

Said the prophet:

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and
what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly,
and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy
God?*

Do justly.

Lincoln would be the first to disabuse us of the illusion that we can conciliate each other upon any other ground than the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. He who taught us that *As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master*, would surely teach us to respect religiously each man's rights to his own Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness. He would show us our duty—in the ballot box and in the jury box—to direct and limit the organized might of our governments *only* to the chaste protection of those same rights, by those powers only, and only by and within those lawful mechanisms and bounds, that we have duly constituted by our common consent.

Love mercy.

Lincoln's magnanimity is larger than life, and constant. It is only remembering the most signal instance of this magnificent magnanimity and grace to recall that, after having commanded the forces of the Union to unequivocal victory in our bloodiest war, he outlined truly for us in his *Second Inaugural Address*, not that the North had been right and the South wrong, but that the fault belonged to us all and always had, that the woe justly due from the offended Divine Justice belonged to us all, and that the binding up of the wounds must now be our common work.

In this magnanimity there was no condescension, only a deep realization of God's eternal Justice and Mercy. So, in our work of citizenship, it is to this standard of mercy and liberality that we must rise, if we are ever again to be one with each other and free.

Walk humbly with thy God.

Lincoln's greatest virtue was his profound humility before the eternal purposes of the Almighty. I realize that to truncate Lincoln is a sin, but here I go, nevertheless:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous

altogether.”

If we are to pass the Test of Americanism in our generation, we must come to confess with Lincoln that even the finest in us falls far short of God’s Justice, Mercy, and Wisdom, that, even when we stand firmly in the right, as He gives us to see it, and even as we freely acknowledge our own faults, while liberally acknowledging the best in each other, none of us can but glimpse the immense fabric of Destiny that God is weaving as He bends all our individual choices, all our failings and flashes of nobility, to His eternal purposes.

So, what of our Test? Will *we* be Americans?

I don’t know about you, but at times I am tempted to believe our cause is hopeless. It can appear that we have been too unfree, too disunited, for far too long to ever become united, free Americans. That the Test of the *Declaration* is just too hard for our generation.

Let us *resist this temptation* to despair. The pessimistic view omits to take into account one more curious feature of the American Test. Ours is, and always has been, a land of miracles. The God of Miracles, who is also the God of Liberty, *wants* us to pass the Test. He teaches to the Test. He has stood at the elbow of each previous generation as it took the Test, ever willing to whisper the answers to hearts willing to embrace those liberating, but challenging, truths of the *Declaration* and to light the way through the impossible to the possibility of united freedom.

O let us then pray to that God, whose almighty hand and love divine *have* led Americans before us. Let us pray that He will mend *our* every flaw, that He will confirm *our* souls in self-control, and *our* Liberty in Law. Let us pray that He will give *us* patriots who love mercy more than life. Finally, let us pray that He will be *our* Ruler, *our* Guardian, Guide and Stay, and that He will make His Word *our* law, His paths *our* chosen way.

If He should condescend to answer this our prayer with His abundant Grace, then I know we *will* pass our American Test together.

Thank you for your attention.

David R. Gillie

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End Notes:

- 1) 1912, to escape compulsory service in the Army of Imperial Russia, which, since the then most recent partition, rules the central Poland of his birth and oppresses Jews.
- 2) 1918, the Army of the United States, his adopted country, which he is so proud to serve.
- 3) John Adams, to Hezekiah Niles, February 13, 1818, The Meaning of the American Revolution.
- 4) The private civic association Oath Keepers is composed of current and former civilian and uniformed public servants in our Federal and State Governments. Oath Keepers’ Pennsylvania Chapter co-sponsored the Independence Day observance at Gettysburg and provided the honor guard that laid the wreath at the foot of the Eternal Light Peace Memorial.
- 5) Pastor Manning was primary sponsor and organizer of the Gettysburg Independence Day Observance. Twelve charter busloads of congregants from Manning’s Atlah Worldwide Church, Harlem, NY, made up a principal portion of the Americans who assembled before the Memorial on Gettysburg Battlefield.
- 6) Micah 6:8.

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