

The American Miracle: Divine Providence in the Rise of the Republic

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Bestselling author and radio host Michael Medved recounts some of the most significant events in America's rise to prosperity and power, from the writing of the Constitution to the Civil War. He reveals a record of improbabilities and amazements that demonstrate what the Founders always believed: that events unfolded according to a master plan, with destiny playing an unmistakable role in lifting the nation to greatness.

Among the stirring, illogical episodes described here:

❓ A band of desperate religious refugees find themselves blown hopelessly off course, only to be deposited at the one spot on a wild continent best suited for their survival

❓ George Washington's beaten army, surrounded by a ruthless foe and on the verge of annihilation, manages an impossible escape due to a freakish change in the weather

❓ A famous conqueror known for seizing territory, frustrated by a slave rebellion and a frozen harbor, impulsively hands Thomas Jefferson a tract of land that doubles the size of the United States

❓ A weary soldier picks up three cigars left behind in an open field and notices the stogies have been wrapped in a handwritten description of the enemy's secret battle plans—a revelation that gives Lincoln the supernatural sign he's awaited in order to free the slaves

When millions worry over the nation losing its way, Medved's sweeping narrative, bursting with dramatic events and lively portraits of unforgettable, occasionally little-known characters, affirms America as "fortune's favorite," shaped by a distinctive destiny from our beginnings to the present day.

Michael Medved's daily three-hour radio program, *The Michael Medved Show*, reaches five million listeners on more than three hundred stations coast to coast. He is the author of twelve other books, including the bestsellers *The 10 Big Lies About America*, *Hollywood vs. America*, *Hospital*, and *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?* He is a member of USA Today's board of contributors, is a former chief film critic for the *New York Post*, and, for more than a decade, cohosted *Sneak Previews*, the weekly movie-review show on PBS. Medved is an honors graduate of Yale with departmental honors in American history. He lives with his family in the Seattle area.

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The Glorious Fourth

Dedication, Death, and Fifty Years of Miracles

Coincidence alone could never explain it: that much seemed obvious to Americans of 1826, just as it does to citizens of today. The eerie events of that epochal Independence Day suggested the intervention of supernatural forces, mixing death and dedication in such powerful ways that observers of all faiths, and of no faith, saw evidence of destiny's direction in American affairs. Even now, after nearly two hundred years of turbulent history, recollections of that "Glorious Fourth" can compel the most skeptical scholars to

acknowledge weird, wonderful aspects in the rise of the Republic, and to reconsider the disconcerting old idea that God shows special tenderness toward the American experiment.

On the occasion of the fiftieth Fourth of July, such confidence in providential protection seemed not only logical but unavoidable. After all, the older citizens of the federal Union had already witnessed a half century of miracles, highlighted by the new nation's prodigious growth and unprecedented prosperity. Americans viewed themselves as a chosen people, selected for special responsibilities to accompany their special blessings, and so looked to biblical references to establish the proper context for major public celebrations.

The preparations for the anniversary repeatedly invoked the Old Testament notion of jubilee, citing a well-known verse in Leviticus: "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you" (25:10). After all, a portion of this same verse had been inscribed onto the Liberty Bell itself--already a cherished national icon just two generations after it reputedly rang out in Philadelphia's Independence Hall to celebrate signing of the Declaration.

A half century later, leaders in every corner of the country arranged for pealing bells in cities, villages, and crossroads churches, in recognition of the breathtaking growth of the young Republic. The most recent census showed almost twelve million inhabitants--nearly five times the population that had launched a world-changing revolution. Even more dramatic, a loose coalition of thirteen thinly settled colonies, clinging to a relatively narrow band of territory at the edge of the Atlantic, had given way to twenty-four flourishing states with plausible dreams of an American empire someday reaching all the way to the Pacific.

In the midst of this dizzying change, Americans of the era clung to their precious remaining connections to the nation's heroic origins, expressing special gratitude for the unlikely survival of the two titans who had played the most prominent roles in declaring independence. At a time when male life expectancy barely reached forty years, John Adams, the "Atlas of Independence" and the second president of the United States, had passed his ninetieth birthday with his faculties and health remarkably intact. From his ancestral home outside of Boston, he watched with passionate engagement as his oldest son (and intellectual soul mate) presided over the government in faraway Washington as the sixth president. In fact, one of the former chief executive's doctors reported that the inauguration of his son in 1825 actually enhanced the old man's strength and vitality. "But physicians do not always consider how much the powers of the mind, and what is called good spirits, can recover the lost energies of the body," wrote Benjamin Waterhouse to President John Quincy Adams. "I really believe that your father's revival is mainly owing to the demonstration that his son has not served an ungrateful public."

Six hundred miles away, at the elegant hilltop plantation house he had designed for himself, Adams's old friend (and sometime bitter rival) Thomas Jefferson also defied the actuarial tables. At eighty-three, the third president struggled with various digestive and

urinary tract afflictions, but he received frequent visitors and maintained a prolific correspondence, commenting eloquently on current affairs. He told his grandson that "I am like an old watch, with a pinion worn out here, and a wheel there, until I can go no longer." He also carefully prepared for his own demise, penning a valedictory poem to his adored surviving daughter, enclosing it in a simple, elegant box she opened only after his death:

Then farewell, my dear, my lov'd daughter, adieu!

The last pang of life is in parting from you!

Yet even with his intensifying focus on his own mortality, Jefferson expressed a fierce determination to survive one more Fourth of July so that "he might breathe the air of the Fiftieth Anniversary."

As the great day approached, organizers of the elaborate public festivities in all of the nation's most important cities turned their attention to Adams and Jefferson as potential guests to lend historic weight to their celebrations. In the Continental Congress of 1776, it had been Adams who led the relentless fight for independence and who, once he had succeeded, recommended his young friend Jefferson to draft the declaration that would explain the decision to a wondering world. Now, of the fifty-six patriots who had affixed their signatures to that final document, only these two and one more--eighty-eight-year-old Charles Carroll of Maryland--were alive to see the half-century commemoration of their handiwork.

Despite pleas from every corner of the country, frail health and the rigors of travel made the journey unthinkable for each of the old men. Adams would have dearly loved to join his son at the White House to preside together over the capital's Grand Jubilee, but a journey to Washington would have consumed more than five days, rattling over rough roads in stiflingly hot stagecoaches and making brief water passages on belching, filthy steamboats.

Instead, he received visitors in the sprawling, comfortably cluttered two-story Quincy residence, Peacefield, he had called home since 1788. He had inhabited the house for the quarter century since disillusioned voters turned him out of the White House after his single term, following an exceptionally nasty and painfully personal campaign waged against him by followers of Jefferson, his old friend. Adams and his wife, Abigail, first acquired the structure and its forty acres of verdant fields and orchards at the conclusion of his diplomatic service in Europe following the Revolution; it stood just down a country road from the modest saltbox home in which he had been born and raised, and from the similarly unassuming neighboring structure in which his son John Quincy first opened his eyes to the New England sunlight. The old man still owned both buildings and hoped to keep them in the family for perpetuity. His beloved Abigail had left him a widower eight years before with her reported last words, "Do not grieve, my friend, my dearest friend. I am ready to go. And John, it will not be long." She rested now in the local churchyard, where her husband of fifty-four years meant to join her when his time came.

Leaders from Boston hoped to lure the old lion to the festive commemorations they had planned in the nearby city, but Adams declined to make the ten-mile trip. He even turned down the local Independence Day committee from Quincy, though he provided them with a sharply worded letter they could read aloud at the upcoming anniversary. He wrote: "My best wishes, in the joys, and festivities, and the solemn services of that day on which will be completed the fiftieth year from its birth, of the independence of the United States: a memorable epoch in the annals of the human race, destined in future history to form the brightest or the blackest page, according to the use or the abuse of those political institutions by which they shall, in time to come, be shaped by the human mind."

The committee of his neighbors, perhaps hoping that the great man would reconsider his participation in commemorations so close to his home, came calling at Peacefield a few days later. They asked Adams to suggest a toast that could be presented in his honor on the holiday. "I will give you," he said without hesitation, "independence forever."

After a moment of silence, his respectful visitors asked if he might consider adding something further. He leaned on his cane and scowled back at them from under his halo of white hair. "Not a word," he crisply replied.

"RAYS OF RAVISHING LIGHT AND GLORY"

His friend Thomas Jefferson felt no similar reluctance to discourse at length. When Mayor Roger Weightman of Washington, D.C., invited all living former presidents--Adams, Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe--to attend the festival planned for the seat of government, each respectfully declined, citing the infirmities of age. The "Sage of Monticello," however, carefully composed a public response that promptly appeared in newspapers around the country and created a national sensation in the weeks before the holiday. He wrote at a desk in his sun-dappled chamber, where a plaster bust of Adams rested on a shelf and overlooked his colleague's work with assumed approbation. Jefferson wrote:

I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met and exchanged there congratulations, personally, with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make, for our country, between submission and the sword; and to have enjoyed with them the consolatory fact that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made. May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. The form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened or opening to the rights of men. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and

spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others; for ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollection of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

With this elegantly crafted testament of faith in the work of his own Revolutionary cohort, Jefferson managed, as he always did, to upstage his old friend. Even John Adams's son, the president of the United States, read Jefferson's words and pronounced himself impressed by the elderly Virginian's vigor of language and clarity of mind.

But it had been the elder Adams, not the more effusive Jefferson, who first predicted the way a grateful nation would come to rejoice over their bold gamble on nationhood. In an exultant letter to his wife, Abigail, back home in Boston, the irascible and tireless patriot had described a fateful day of decision at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776 and then recorded an uncanny burst of prophecy, shockingly typical of our founding fathers. The delegate from Massachusetts declared that the second day of July, when his congressional colleagues first voted to authorize permanent separation from the mother country, would become known as the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. 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 another, from this time forward forevermore. You will think me transported with enthusiasm but I am not. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure it will cost us to maintain this Declaration and to support and defend these states. Yet through all the gloom, I can see rays of ravishing light and glory.

REJECTING MR. JEFFERSON'S "SEDITIONOUS PAPER"

Unfortunately, it took more than a generation for those rays to shine in a healing, benevolent fashion on the implacably warring factions that afflicted the new nation. To a startling extent, partisanship undermined the development of a national holiday and even spoiled appreciation of the Declaration, which was indelibly associated with its principal author, Jefferson, a profoundly controversial figure for most of his political career. The Federalists who controlled the national government between 1789 and 1801 felt no inclination to honor Jefferson's masterpiece, considering its language too explicitly anti-British and suspiciously, if vaguely, pro-French. On July 4, 1800, two ministers ostentatiously walked out of a public worship service honoring independence when one of their young students insisted on reading aloud from Mr. Jefferson's "seditious paper."

Within a year, one of the most vitriolic elections in American history brought the Jeffersonians into full control in the capital. The new president delivered a famously conciliatory inaugural address, attempting to defuse wild talk of disunion and resistance

from some of the indignant Adams loyalists. "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle," Thomas Jefferson declared. "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." Nevertheless, his triumphal followers displayed a fervent determination to exclude their vanquished foes from their strictly partisan Fourth of July balls and banquets, much as they themselves had been excluded in previous years.

Only with the presidency of James Monroe (1817-25) did the nation finally welcome the "Era of Good Feelings," in which even the most strident politicians could put aside contempt for the opposition long enough to jointly fire cannon, march in flag-waving parades, gorge themselves at public banquets, and toast the Republic with brimming silver bowls of rum in community-wide celebrations of Independence Day. In part, this development reflected the disappearance of the most divisive issue of America's early years: the ongoing world war between Britain and France in which competing U.S. factions took opposite sides. With Napoleon's definitive defeat in 1815, the old Federalists and their heirs had no more reason to fear the rampages of imperial or revolutionary France, just as Jefferson's Democratic-Republican minions felt less inclination toward bitterness against the globally victorious British Empire they had battled in both a bloody revolution and the War of 1812. Monroe won reelection with no organized opposition, and during his second term even aging political warriors, most notably Adams and Jefferson, began to embrace the idea that their common values and shared experiences counted for more than ideological distinctions or colliding ambitions

After all, the most discerning among them understood that the rising Republic faced more dangerous divisions than...

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1787-1789. (115,000 today) is because it has on its face the legend, 'United States of America - One Dollar . . . with firm reliance on Divine Providence we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.'