

BY KIMBERLEY CY. MOTLEY

What Independence Day means to me is a day to appreciate who we are as a nation but also a day to reflect on who we should be.



Kimberley Cy. Motley, Marquette 2003, is an international human rights and civil rights attorney for over 15 years. In 2009 she became the first and only foreign lawyer to litigate in Afghanistan's courts. She is widely known for her work in fighting for human rights around the world and has represented clients on nearly every continent. She is the founding partner of Motley Legal Services, in Matthews, North Carolina, and is chair of the State Bar of Wisconsin's Civil Rights & Liberties Section and a member of the Nonresident Lawyers Division and the Section Leaders Council. Access the digital article at wisbar.org/wl.

Motleylegal.com
kmotley@motleylegal.com

What Does Independence Day Mean to Me?

The writers of the Declaration of Independence created a document that explained why America should be independent and they set forth aspirational ideas for a new nation by articulating the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But the work continues to ensure that all citizens are afforded these basic rights.

Over 247 years ago, the Declaration of Independence was signed by 56 delegates. The writers were tasked with creating a document explaining why America should be independent. This document, while not legally binding, was a powerful aspirational record that Abraham Lincoln later called “a rebuke and a stumbling-block to tyranny and oppression.”

When I was a young girl, my siblings and I went with my parents to vote at every election that they could. My parents wanted to instill in us to not take our freedoms for granted. No matter the time or weather, they came home after working a full day and made sure that we voted together.

My mother, who was born in northern Korea, sparingly shared painful stories of how, when she was a child, her family was forced to leave their home to travel south during the war. As a young woman, she met and married my African American father who was from Louisiana and was sent to Korea as a soldier in the U.S. Air Force. Both my parents made sacrifices for me to have the freedoms that so many around the world do not have, such as going to school, working, and just existing. They both understood war, and, in many ways, they sacrificed their own happiness to try to make a better life for us.

When my mother came to the U.S., we watched *Sesame Street* together as the puppets taught us English. To my mother, becoming American meant that her voice mattered and that she belonged. She broke away from cultural norms and married my father, sacrificing her relationship with her Korean family. She did this because she believed in America, she believed in the freedoms, and she like so many others embraced its ideals. My parents raised me to believe that it is our duty to make our communities better than we find them. My parents met and married against insurmountable odds, and they raised us on the aspirational ideals to be better.

When the men wrote the Declaration of Independence, they did so at great risk to themselves knowing that they were committing treason against the British government and monarchy. They were acutely aware that by signing the document it would be clear evidence of their treasonous act and that death was the penalty. They signed it anyway.

The signers of this document were 56 white men who were lawyers, merchants, farmers, and plantation owners. They were all men of means and in their collective vision of equality, women, Native Americans, African Americans, and slaves were not necessarily part of the equation to enjoy the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In fact, 41 of the 56 signers were slaveowners and there were only a handful of ardent abolitionists.

What Independence Day means to me is a day to appreciate who we are as a nation but also a day to reflect on who we should be. Martin Delaney, a black activist who started *The North Star* publication with Frederick Douglass, said that “true patriotism requires critique.”

What does Independence Day mean to me? It's complicated. **WL**