

As we enter this summer of pandemic, protest and presidential politics, I find myself reflecting more than ever on American history and the broad patterns and deep roots that bind us, confound us, and confront us, challenging us to ask what we can learn from our past and how those lessons can help move us forward. July is an especially appropriate time to reflect on the price and promise of American democracy. From its adoption in the summer of 1776, the words of the [Declaration of Independence](#) profoundly shaped global history, even as the authors themselves fell far short of fulfilling their own ideals, institutionalizing both slavery and the forced removal of Native Americans at the very moment they were proclaiming their own independence. But those words also marked the beginning of something new in history—the belief that individuals, working together, have the power to create the world they want to see.

The possibility of the new—it would be the constant promise of American history, that despite all the progress and failings of American life, the hope of renewal was fundamental to the nature of American democracy (and to our own personal aspirations). According to the Declaration, whenever a government neglected to uphold the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of the individual, "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." Upon those radical terms, the American experiment took its first tentative steps.

Eighty-seven years later, in November 1863, Abraham Lincoln recalled those founding ideals but was inspired to construct upon them a new history, starting in his own day, that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." For many historians, Lincoln's simple [address at Gettysburg](#) was indeed a rebirth—a new start—for a nation that had failed to achieve its original aspirational ideals, but whose vision still had the power to move hearts and minds.

Fast forward a century, to [August 1963](#), when in the shadow of Lincoln's monument, Martin

Luther King, Jr. envisioned yet another re-start to American history, describing a "dream deeply rooted in the American dream... that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: that all men are created equal." King evoked those founding words but called for a recommitment to making their meaning real.

There have been other critical moments of rebirth, when the nation seemed at once to be breaking apart and breaking new ground. Roosevelt's [New Deal](#), Kennedy's [New Frontier](#), Johnson's [Great Society](#) were all attempts to restart the American experiment at moments of great stress, using crisis to draw a starting line in the sand. Likewise with the movements for civil rights, women's suffrage and [Black Lives Matter](#), millions of Americans have fought bravely and boldly to realize a new, better America.

In June 2015, toward the end of his presidency, Barack Obama went to Charleston, South Carolina, to mourn those who died in the horrific murders at [Mother Emanuel AME Church](#) that month. Like so many Americans of earlier eras, facing seemingly intractable problems but sensing a better future, Obama seized what Dr. King called the "fierce urgency of now," and called for yet another new era, building on the unfilled promises of the past but breaking free of its faults and failures. Obama specifically spoke of how history can propel us to that new world: "History can't be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress," he said that day, "but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past - how to break the cycle. A roadway toward a better world." History as a prelude to the new.

Later this Fall, MOHAI looks more closely at the "roadway" of democracy in ***Stand Up Seattle: The Democracy Project***, an exhibit which explores how we can create the change we want to see. And in exploring tools for change, we will be finding a continuum with the spirit of July 1776, when for the first time in history a nascent government declared that a new world is indeed within our power to achieve.