

JULY 1

Mourn on the Fourth of July

Am I the only U.S. citizen who finds the annual Fourth rituals to be cloying and deceptive? Yeah – just me and probably tens of millions of other people. Ever since the Vietnam War, the Fourth of July has seemed to be a celebration of the past in the midst of a distinctly un-glorious present. In 2005, as in 1965, lyrical appreciation of “bombs bursting in air” is chilling in the context of current realities.

Overall, my outlook on the yearly Independence Day spectacle remains what it was a decade ago:

Patriotic holidays come and go, but one theme is fairly constant in our country's mass media – the founding fathers were a sterling bunch of guys.

Their press notices are usually raves when the Fourth of July rolls around – superficial accolades for leaders of the struggle for independence.

It's true that the famed men of the American Revolution were brave, eloquent and visionary as they challenged the British despot, King George III. But present-day news media usually avoid acknowledging an uncomfortable fact: Many of those heroes didn't seem to mind very much when they benefitted from injustice.

Take the genius who wrote the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson certainly had a passion for freedom: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...”

All men? Not quite. The luxuries of Monticello were made possible by slavery. Jefferson may have wrestled with his conscience, but it lost. He remained a slave owner until he died.

As for women, forget it. Jefferson assumed that females should have no right to own property or to vote. Women, he contended, would be “too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics.”

The truth be told, some of the leading patriots were downright greedy.

George Washington was America's richest man. And he had a record as a land spec-

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ulator that makes Donald Trump seem like a penny-ante developer. After the Revolutionary War, as author Howard Zinn points out in "A People's History of the United States," Washington used his enormous wealth and power to snap up vast tracts of land.

Patrick Henry was also among the heroic fighters for independence who went on to make a killing in westward real estate. After demanding "Give me liberty or give me death," Henry wanted Indians out of the way. His slogan could have become: "Give me property or give them death."

James Madison and many other founders of the United States were masters of large plantations. They made sure that the U.S. Constitution would perpetuate slavery: counting each slave as three-fifths of a person, with no rights.

Is this just old, irrelevant history – dredged up from water over the dam? Not at all.

Turning a blind eye to ugly aspects of the past can be a bad habit that carries over into the present: Too often, journalists focus on P.R. facades (old or new) and pay little attention to the people left out of the pretty picture.

Back in 1776, all the flowery oratory about freedom did nothing for black slaves, women, indentured servants or Native Americans. If we forget that fact, we are remembering only fairy tales instead of history.

During the Constitution's 1987 bicentennial, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall punctured the time-honored idolatry of the Constitution's framers: "The government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war and momentous social transformation to attain the ... respect for individual freedoms and human rights we hold as fundamental today."

Most of the delegates who gathered in Philadelphia to draw up the Constitution were wealthy. And they "were determined that persons of birth and fortune should control the affairs of the nation and check the 'leveling impulses' of the propertyless multitude that composed 'the majority faction,'" writes political scientist Michael Parenti.

In his book "Democracy for the Few," Parenti notes: "The delegates spent many weeks debating their interests, but these were the differences of merchants, slave owners, and manufacturers, a debate of haves vs. have-nots in which each group sought safeguards within the new Constitution for its particular concerns."

However, "there were no dirt farmers or poor artisans attending the convention to proffer an opposing viewpoint. The debate between haves and have-nots never occurred." And "the delegates repeatedly stated their intention to erect a government strong enough to protect the haves from the have-nots."

After more than two centuries, you'd hope that more journalists would be willing to

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set aside fawning myths about the founding fathers. If that ever happens, the emergence of candor might even help shed some light on the ruling fathers of today.

*Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
The book's first chapter is posted at: www.WarMadeEasy.com*