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Our country will soon celebrate its 200th birthday -- our bicentennial. On July 4, 1976, 210 million Americans will take the time to count the gifts that we as a nation possess.

A birthday is a celebration and so it should be. A birthday is a ritual of life -- that wondrous gift that only God bestows.

Yet, the birthday celebration of a nation goes beyond blowing out candles on a cake. For the birthday of America marks not so much a biological event as a spiritual one. Our nation was born when 56 courageous men met in Philadelphia to declare our independence from the rule of Britain. That declaration was also a call to war. The signers did not know how long such a war would last, whether the resources of arms and men existed to assure victory or whether such a victory could be won under any circumstances.

These dark days were full of foreboding for a young country. Yet, the signers of that historic document had a given determination to succeed and a spirit of resolve that has marked America since that time. The spirit of America is not doomed to die as is the body of we mortals. Just as we believe that indefinable essence, the soul, will live on, so does this country's soul live on. It is passed from one generation to the next.

Some would assert that the political events of the last few years have assured the descent of the American soul into the fire of hell. Watergate was a mortal sin they say, and our country has sunk so low that neither man nor God can raise it again.

Others see in these political events some conspiracy against the American people. They claim that a vocal minority, especially those of the press, are tearing this country apart by bringing out every skeleton from every closet. We have all heard the slogans: My Country Right Or Wrong; America Love It Or Leave It. These people believe that we should close our eyes to our imperfections--that an objective view of ourselves is akin to treason. I think we

should have the courage to withstand such scrutiny and view the results.

If one man, if one hundred men, if one thousand men are charged and convicted of crimes against our country, it still doesn't convince me that this country is doomed. Or that new men of strength will not replace those who have fallen, that new patriots will not take the reins of leadership.

We tend to be somewhat embarrassed in our patriotism. Somehow we fear it connotes blind faith. But in the truest sense of the word, a patriot is not blind. He does not believe his country is perfect. A patriot has the courage to keep his eyes open even when the most painful events occur in his midst. He may cry out in distress --but if he closes his eyes to injustice, he is not a patriot -- he is a coward.

We learn by our mistakes. A wise man is a man of action, he makes mistakes. He is not afraid of them. But he learns through them to temper his actions by his experience.

Man draws on his experience to compose moral codes. Now, no one claims that these codes are perfect. For various reasons, we take exception to them when we are convinced that it is necessary. When a group of men, especially those in power, violate the codes for selfish reasons, corruption is the result.

The basic codes of the lives of most of us are the Ten Commandments and the Constitution. The Constitution seeks to fulfill what the Commandments command -- that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We express our love for our neighbor through our love of country -- and we should love our country enough to bear with its mistakes and change it for the better.

My country right or wrong -- no. My country right when it is right, wrong when it is wrong.

Forgive, but with justice. Forget, but also remember. Laugh, but don't be afraid to cry.

When I cry for my country, I cry because I care. It is time we told our country --individually and collectively -- how much we love her. If we don't love our country, we are in effect hating ourselves. And if we hate ourselves, this bright, hopeful world will pass us by. Our chance to grasp it, mold it, change it will be lost forever.

We each have our limitations. We have weaknesses as well as strengths. But please stop telling me that you and I -- that our nation --is doomed to eternal damnation. That the malaise which has been with us this past year is proof of our limitations. If it is proof of our

limitations, our willingness and ability to do something about it is no less proof of our vital strength as a free people.

If America can regain faith in herself, we can embark on our third century tempered by our mistakes, but enthusiastic about our future. For every tear we shed for America today, we shall one day shout for joy in the America of tomorrow.

Our Constitution lives on. Watergate has brought our nation to the confessional. America may have been scarred but properly healed she will be stronger. We may have been ignorant, but we will be wiser. And if we all believe this is truer, it will be so.

The spirit of our country lives on -- but only if we are patriots with eyes open -- whose errand it is to keep our eyes open to wrong --and to love our country enough to change those things which are wrong. If we are true to this mission, then our bicentennial will not so much mark the end of 200 years as a nation but as the beginning of our third century as a free people in a free nation with a proud past but an even greater future.

Our 200th birthday can indeed be what it should be -- a celebration.