

# WALK SLOWLY WITH PURPOSE

## AMERICA AT 250: ONE NATION, MANY VOICES, STILL MOVING FORWARD

By **Dominic Fortuna**

KALKASKA, Mich. — The fireworks have faded and the bunting has come down, but the question lingers across kitchen tables and town halls from Maine to California. We just marked 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the celebration was grand. Parades filled Main Streets. Brass bands played. Flags snapped in the July wind.

### Yet not everyone celebrated.

In a nation of 340 million people, some sat it out. Some protested. Some asked hard questions about whether a country with an imperfect record deserves a birthday party. The truth is simple and old as families themselves. If we look only at the hard times, we miss the full story. And America’s story is wide, complicated, and still being written.

### A Record that shaped the world

Perfection has never been the American claim. Impact has. Over 250 years, the United States has changed the course of human history in measurable ways.

American scientists split the atom and then led the world into the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. American researchers developed the polio vaccine, the smallpox eradication campaign, and the first successful use of insulin to treat diabetes. American inventors gave the world the telephone, the light bulb, the airplane, the internet, and the GPS system that now guides ships, trucks, and ambulances across every continent.

American aid rebuilt Europe after World War II through the Marshall Plan, committing more than 13 billion dollars between 1948 and 1952 to restore cities, factories, and farms. American food assistance through programs like Food for Peace has fed hundreds of millions during famine. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, launched in 2003, has saved more than 25 million lives in Africa and around the globe.

### Strength used to protect

The United States remains the dominant military power on earth. Our Navy keeps sea lanes open for trade that feeds and fuels the planet. Our Air Force has delivered humanitarian relief after earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes from Haiti to Indonesia. Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and guardians have stood watch in Korea for 70 years so that a free people could build a democracy that now ranks among the world’s leading economies.

Have we used force in ways that drew criticism? Yes. Have we made mistakes in Iraq, Vietnam, and elsewhere? Yes. A nation that acts will sometimes act imperfectly. The difference is that we debate those choices openly, change course when needed, and hold leaders accountable at the ballot box.

### Out of many, one

We are a nation built by every nation. More than 45 million Americans were born in another country. We speak over 350 languages at home. We worship in churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and in the quiet of our own hearts. *E pluribus unum* still appears on our currency for a reason. Out of many, one.

From Washington to Lincoln to Roosevelt to Reagan to Obama, the presidency has reflected that diversity of thought and background. Washington resigned his commission and walked away from power, setting a precedent for civilian rule. Lincoln held the Union together and issued the Emancipation Proclamation. FDR led the nation through Depression and world war. Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to protect Black children walking into school in Little Rock. Reagan challenged Moscow to tear down a wall. Every administration has carried both achievements and failures. That is the nature of leadership in a free republic.

### A system that corrects itself

Yes, we have downfalls. We lived with slavery for 89 years under the Constitution and ended it with the 13th Amendment in 1865. It took another 100 years to guarantee voting rights for all citizens with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Women could not vote nationally until the 19th Amendment in 1920. We have interned our own citizens, fought unjust wars, and fallen short of our ideals.

But the American story is the story of self-correction. Our justice system, with trial by jury and due process, remains a model studied by new democracies. Our courts have overturned segregation, protected speech, and checked the power of presidents. Our ballots have peacefully replaced leaders for 59 straight presidential elections. That record is unmatched in human history.

### Why some did not celebrate

So why did some Americans not feel like lighting a sparkler this year? Some are grieving personal loss, economic hardship, or the sense that their corner of the country has been forgotten. Some are angry at politics that feel bitter and loud. Some believe gratitude is unearned until every problem is solved.

Have we lost our way when it comes to gratitude? Maybe we are out of practice. Gratitude does not mean blindness. It means seeing the whole picture. A family that has been through illness, job loss, and arguments can still be grateful for the roof, the table, and the chance to try again tomorrow. A nation can do the same.

### The view from middle America

America is not only New York and Los Angeles. It is not only Washington. It is Kalkaska and Gaylord and Petoskey and Traverse City. It is the farms between them and the forests that run to the water.

And that is where the story turns to summer.

### Northern Michigan and the American summer

If you want to see the country at its best, come north in July and August. For generations, families have pointed their cars toward the Mackinac Bridge and felt their shoulders drop. The bridge itself is an American feat. Opened in 1957, it stretches five miles across the Straits of Mackinac and stands as one of the longest suspension bridges in the Western Hemisphere. Every Labor Day, tens of thousands walk it together, strangers becoming neighbors for five miles.

Come in early spring and you will find the National Trout Festival in Kalkaska, a celebration of cold water, clean rivers, and small-town pride that has run since 1936. Come in July and the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City draws over 500,000 people to honor the growers who made this region the cherry capital of the world. Walk the stalls and you will hear a dozen accents and see license plates from every state.

Go a little farther and you find Torch Lake. On a sunny Saturday the sandbar is a floating city of families. Pontoon boats tie up, side by side. Kids jump into water so clear it looks shallow at eight feet. The people there are every color and background the country holds. They are there for the same reasons. Freedom to gather. Safety to bring children. Public water that belongs to everyone. That is liberty you can touch.

Mackinac Island bans cars and runs on horses, bicycles, and time. It reminds us that some things are worth preserving. The Grand Hotel porch has seen soldiers home from war, couples on honeymoons, and grandparents teaching grandchildren how to play checkers. Generation after generation has come here and left with the same feeling. This place is special because the country that holds it is special.

### The best place on earth

We have problems to solve. We always will. But when people around the world vote with their feet, they come here. More than one million people become naturalized American citizens each year. Students cross oceans to attend our universities. Refugees seek our shores because our system, with all its flaws, still protects speech, property, faith, and the right to a day in court.

Our justice system is not perfect, but it is open. Our voting rights have expanded across two and a half centuries, and the ballot remains the great equalizer. We abolished slavery, endured a civil war, and then built a nation where the grandchild of a slave could become president, and the child of immigrants could command a space shuttle mission.

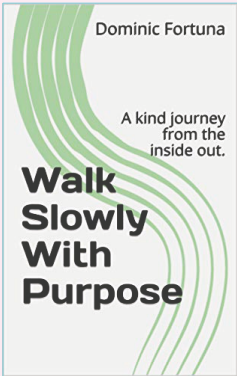
### A summer invitation

So as the rest of summer rolls on, remember where you live. Northern Michigan is not a backdrop. It is a front porch for the American idea. The tourists who come up US 131 and I-75 are not strangers. They are countrymen. They are here for the same lakes, the same sunsets, the same freedom you wake up to.

Be kind on the road when traffic slows for a fudge shop. Hold a door in a crowded ice cream line. Help a family launch a kayak at the sandbar. Wave a boat past when the water is busy. Say good morning on the trail. That is not small. That is the American way lived out in the space we share.

America is beautiful. It is a wonderful place to be and a wonderful place to live. From the cherry orchards to the trout streams, from the blue of Torch Lake to the white of the Mackinac Bridge towers, the evidence is all around us. We have had hard times, and we will have them again. But no one should be bashing this country. It is still the best place on earth to call home.

See you on the water.



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