

# Opinion Juneteenth is meant to unite us, just like the Fourth of July

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Juneteenth is more than a holiday. It is not just a commemoration of the end of slavery. It is a day that celebrates America’s incredible capacity to self-correct by applying the timeless principles at our country’s core. Yet as we prepare to mark Juneteenth’s second year as a federal holiday, we have to ask: Will we let this celebration fall prey to the division and distraction that are tearing America down? Or will we embrace its true meaning, commit to ending the injustices that surround us, and ultimately lift America up?

By all rights, Juneteenth should be a day of great unity. When the enslaved people of Galveston, Tex., were told of their freedom on June 19, 1865, the promise of America became much more real and attainable. It was hardly the end of *all* injustice, but it was the end of one of the country’s *original* injustices. That’s why generations of Black Americans made June 19 into a long-standing holiday. What could be more American than remembering the forward march of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

Yet Juneteenth is at risk of failing to be a source of unity. In these partisan times, there is a tendency to ignore or politicize it. There is also a danger of commercialization — think corporate attempts to trademark the word “Juneteenth” — which would cheapen this celebration of justice. Regardless of color, creed or country of origin, all Americans should oppose these trends, with all the urgency we can muster. If we forget the meaning of Juneteenth, we have little chance of continuing the progress this day is meant to spotlight and spark.

Juneteenth asks Americans to recognize that our nation’s principles are neither grossly hypocritical nor naively aspirational. We have inherited lofty yet practical ideals, and it falls to us to implement them as best we can.

In 1865, that meant fighting attempts to reimpose slavery through violence. In 2022, it means opposing new forms of violence, whether it is violence that comes from within a community or violence perpetrated by the police. This murderous violence claims thousands of promising lives every year, breaks up families, and sows the distrust that poisons relationships and worsens situations. This crisis of violence has many sources and defies a simplistic explanation or a single solution. Yet solutions exist, and if we hope to find them, it will take Americans of all backgrounds working together.

Those who made Juneteenth what it is today would be the first to say this holiday is not an event; it's an invitation. That includes those of us who fought to make it a federal holiday. One of us, Opal Lee, spent more than two decades spreading the word about the meaning of Juneteenth and the national need to rally around it. What started with a single teacher grew every day through collaboration, until a diverse group of people achieved what previous generations thought impossible.

In a similar way, rather than pointing fingers or accusing each other of bad faith, people should dedicate themselves to the hard work of combating violence in their cities and neighborhoods. The two of us have been inspired by groups that bring together police and communities for tough conversations and break the cycle of gang violence, such as the nonprofit Urban Specialists in Dallas. We think of projects that help people leaving the criminal justice system build better lives, such as Hudson Link in New York. There are dozens more we could name, and for every good effort we know about, we're sure there are hundreds more — along with countless people whose ideas deserve to become a reality.

Juneteenth has always been about unleashing those ideas. It's about putting the incredible power of community to work — not in an abstract sense but through the hard work of each of us as individuals. From the start, this holiday inspired Black Americans to celebrate overcoming the injustices of the past and take steps to pursue a more just future. And if our national history proves anything, it's this: The more people who get involved in that work, the faster and better it goes. Just look at the civil rights movement, which inspired and then transformed our nation.

We can't let Juneteenth become just another holiday or, worse, a holiday for only one segment of the country. We should see it for what it really is: the other half of the Fourth of July. These two holidays, which fall a mere two weeks apart, represent the best of America. One celebrates the Declaration of Independence, which contains what the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass called "saving principles." The other celebrates America's journey to live by those principles.

This great work is never done, and if we hope to do it, it will take the commitment of every American. Surely that's a vision we can rally around, so we can truly celebrate freedom from the 19th of June to the Fourth of July — and move freedom forward every day of the year.