The idea was there at the very beginning, well before Thomas Jefferson could not have imagined the reach of his call across the world in time to come when he wrote:

“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, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But over the next two centuries the call would reach the potato patches of Ireland, the ghettos of Europe, the paddyfields of China, stirring farmers to leave their lands and townsmen their trades and thus unsettling all traditional civilizations.

It is the call from Thomas Jefferson, embodied in the great statue that looks down the Narrows of New York Harbor, and in the immigrants who answered the call, that we now celebrate.

Some of the first European Americans had come to the new continent to worship God in their own way, others to seek their fortunes. But, over a century-and-a-half, the new world changed those Europeans, above all the Englishmen who had come to North America. Neither King nor Court nor Church could stretch over the ocean to the wild continent. To survive, the first emigrants had to learn to govern themselves. But the freedom of the wilderness whetted their appetites for more freedoms. By the time Jefferson drafted his call, men were in the field fighting for those new-learned freedoms, killing and being killed by English soldiers, the best-trained troops in the world, supplied by the world’s greatest navy. Only something worth dying for could unite American volunteers and keep them in the field—a stated cause, a flag, a nation they could call their own.

When, on the Fourth of July, 1776, the colonial leaders who had been meeting as a Continental Congress in Philadelphia voted to approve Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, it was not puffed up rhetoric for them to pledge to each other “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” Unless their new “United States of America” won the war, the Congressmen would be judged traitors as relentlessly as would the irregulars-under-arms in the field....

The new Americans were tough men fighting for a very tough idea. How they won their battles is a story for the schoolbooks, studied by scholars, wrapped in myths by historians and poets. But what is most important is the story of the idea that made them into a nation, the idea that made them into a nation, the idea had an explosive power undreamed of in 1776.

All other nations had come into being among people whose families had lived for time out of mind on the same land where they were born. Englishmen are English, Frenchmen are French, Chinese are Chinese, while their governments come and go; their national states can be torn apart and remade without losing their nationhood. But Americans are a nation born of an idea; not the place, but the idea, created the United States Government.
The story we celebrate...is the story of how this idea worked itself out, how it stretched and changed and how the call for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” does still, as it did in the beginning, mean different things to different people.

The debate began with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. That task was left to Jefferson of Virginia, who spent two weeks in an upstairs room in a Philadelphia boarding house penning a draft, while John Adams and Benjamin Franklin questioned, edited, hardened his phrases. By the end of that hot and muggy June, the three had reached agreement: the Declaration contained the ringing universal theme Jefferson strove for and, at the same time, voiced American grievances toughly enough to please the feisty Adams and the pragmatic Franklin. After brief debate, Congress passed it.

As the years wore on, the great debate expanded between Jefferson and Adams. The young nation flourished and Jefferson chose to think of America’s promise as a call to all the world, its promises universal. A few weeks before he died, he wrote, “May it be to the world, what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst their chains.” To Adams, the call meant something else—it was the call for American independence, the cornerstone of an American state.

Their argument ran through their successive Administrations. Adams, the second President, suspected the French Revolutionaries; Alien and Sedition Acts were passed during his term of office to protect the American state and its liberties against French subversion. But Jefferson, the third President, welcomed the French. the two men, once close friends, became archrivals. Still, as they grew old, their rivalry faded; there was glory enough to share in what they had made; in 1812, they began a correspondence that has since become classic, remembering and taking comfort in the triumphs of their youth.

Adams and Jefferson lived long lives and died on the same day—the Fourth of July, 1826, 50 years to the day from the Continental Congress’ approval of the Declaration. Legend has it that Adams breathed on his death bed, “Thomas Jefferson still survives.” As couriers set out from Braintree carrying the news of Adams’ death, couriers were riding north from Virginia with the news of Jefferson’s death. The couriers met in Philadelphia. Horace Greeley, then a youth in Vermont, later remembered: “…When we learned...that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, the author and the great champion, respectively, of the Declaration, had both died on that day, and that the messengers bearing South and North, respectively, the tidings of their decease, had met in Philadelphia, under the shadow of that Hall in which our independence was declared, it seemed that a Divine attestation had solemnly hallowed and sanctified the great anniversary by the impressive ministration of Death.”

In his essay, Theodore H. White asserts that immigration is key to the idea of America. Since its founding, the United States has welcomed more immigrants than any other nation. From 1820-1930, about 60 percent of all immigration worldwide was to the United States. From 1905 to 1914, more than a million people immigrated to the United States each year, seeking opportunity or fleeing oppression.