

The Declaration of Independence

July 4, 1776

INTRODUCTION

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the American political tradition. It articulates the fundamental ideas that form the American nation: All men are created free and equal and possess the same inherent, natural rights. Legitimate governments must therefore be based on the consent of the governed and must exist “to secure these rights.”

As a practical matter, the Declaration of Independence announced to the world the unanimous decision of the thirteen American colonies to separate themselves from Great Britain. But its true revolutionary significance—then as well as now—is the declaration of a new basis of political legitimacy in the sovereignty of the people. The Americans’ final appeal was not to any man-made decree or evolving spirit but to rights inherently possessed by all men. These rights are found in eternal “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” As such, the Declaration’s meaning transcends the particulars of time and circumstances.

The circumstances of the Declaration’s writing make us appreciate its exceptionalist claims even

more. The war against Britain had been raging for more than two years when the Continental Congress, following a resolution of Richard Henry Lee on June 7, 1776, appointed a committee to explore the independence of the colonies from Great Britain. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston turned to their colleague Thomas Jefferson to draft a formal declaration which they then submitted, with few corrections, to Congress. On July 2 Congress voted for independence and proceeded to debate the wording of the Declaration, which was, with the notable deletion of Jefferson’s vehement condemnation of slavery, unanimously approved on the evening of July 4. Every Fourth of July, America celebrates not the actual act of independence (proclaimed on July 2) but rather the public proclamation of the principles behind the act.

The Declaration has three parts—the famous Preamble, a list of charges against King George III, and a conclusion. The Preamble summarizes the fundamental principles of American self-government. The list of charges against the king presents examples of the vio-

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lation of those principles. The stirring conclusion calls for duty, action, and sacrifice.

Preamble (and first paragraph). Although a document justifying revolutionary war, the Declaration argues throughout on the basis of universal reason by paying “decent respect to the opinions of mankind” and appealing to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”

Self-Evident Truths. The Declaration bases America and its government on self-evident truths such as human equality and certain “unalienable rights.” The truths are self-evident, not in the sense of being immediately obvious to everyone, but rather in presenting the logical or evident conclusion of what enlightened humanity understands by a human being. Self-evident truths are also not restricted to any one era or nation; they are as true today as they were in 1776, as true in America as they are in contemporary China or in ancient Greece. To enforce those rights is the challenge of American politics.

Rights. Such rights are acknowledged and affirmed liberties inherent in human nature—the right to own property, for example. They are not merely powers, and neither are they simply wishes or desires. “[E]ndowed by their Creator,” these rights transcend the ability of any government to destroy them (though killing or enslaving the men and women who possess these rights is, of course, another matter). Thus, these inherent or natural rights produce *legitimate* government and deny the legitimacy of any government justified merely on, for example, heredity, religion, class, race, or wealth.

Equality. So conceived, American government is fundamentally about rights or liberty. But these rights follow from the equality of all men. This precedence of equality obviously does not mean an equality of strength, character, batting averages, or writing skill; nor does it demand a communistic equality of results or condition. In fact the Declara-

tion’s idea of equality would forbid such an arbitrary leveling of the naturally diverse human condition. Whatever our differences, there exists a fundamental human identity—that no one is born to rule or be ruled. Equality in this sense therefore requires that legitimate government be based on “the consent of the governed.”

The Pursuit of Happiness. The purpose of such a legitimate government in turn is to protect “certain unalienable rights,” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Rights culminate in the pursuit (that is, the vocation, not the chase) of happiness. And happiness is not about self-satisfaction or stupefied pleasure but rather a life lived to its full potential—human flourishing.

The Right of Revolution. Politically, the most important right is the right of self-government, which the whole Declaration elaborates upon, in theory and practice. Violation of government by consent calls forth the right, if not the duty, of “the people” (not any angry individual or mob) to “alter or to abolish” a government destructive of rights and to “institute new government” that will bring about “their safety and happiness.” Throughout the Declaration we see attention to both life’s necessities (“safety” or the right to life) and highest aspirations (“happiness”).

Indictment. The 27 charges against the king list in increasing severity his violations of American colonists’ civil, political, and natural rights. The Declaration lays out a “long train of abuses” culminating in “absolute tyranny.” Legitimate revolutions—those that protect the natural rights of the people—require more than “light and transient causes.” The king has interfered with our rights not only to our pursuit of happiness but also to liberty and to life itself.

Conclusion. The king is a tyrant, “unfit to be the ruler of a free people,” deaf to the pleas of justice and humanity. The Congress is forced to proclaim the colonies free and independent states, and the delegates

pledge to each other their “Lives, ... Fortunes and ... sacred Honor.”

Almost fifty years later, Jefferson described the Declaration as “an expression of the American mind... All its authority rests ... on the harmonizing sentiments of the day...” The Declaration weaves together philosophy, theology, and political history, both the American mind and American experience. A secular document, the Declaration nonetheless needs religion for its authority. Thus, God is mentioned or referred to four times, in three capacities: legislator (Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God), Creator (or executive),

Supreme Judge of the world, and as guardian (divine Providence).

The first of the four organic laws of the United States, the Declaration may lack legal force but remains nonetheless the source of all legitimate political authority. No wonder the Declaration’s greatest expositor, Abraham Lincoln, referred to it as more than “a merely revolutionary document.” For the first time a nation constituted itself on what it has in common with all other people throughout geographic place and history and thus gave hope and inspiration to the whole world. The Declaration created America and with it a “new order of the ages” (*novus ordo seclorum*) in the history of human self-government.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

In Congress, July 4, 1776

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their

right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly, for opposing, with manly firmness, his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the state remaining, in the mean time, exposed to all the dangers of invasions from without and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has obstructed the administration of justice, by refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made judges dependent on his will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies, without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us;

For protecting them, by a mock trial, from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states;

For cutting off our trade with all parts of the world;
For imposing taxes on us without our consent;

For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury;

For transporting us beyond seas, to be tried for pretended offenses;

For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbi-

trary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these colonies;

For taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments;

For suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here, by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow-citizens, taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has excited domestic insurrection among us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have we been wanting in our attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them, from time to time, of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice

and magnanimity; and we have conjured them, by the ties of our common kindred, to disavow these usurpations which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too, have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our separation, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

WE, THEREFORE, the REPRESENTATIVES of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies solemnly publish and declare, That these

United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that, as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

[Signed by] JOHN HANCOCK [President]

New Hampshire
JOSIAH BARTLETT,
WM. WHIPPLE,
MATTHEW THORNTON.

Massachusetts Bay
SAML. ADAMS,
JOHN ADAMS,
ROBT. TREAT PAINE,
ELBRIDGE GERRY

Rhode Island
STEP. HOPKINS,
WILLIAM ELLERY.

Connecticut
ROGER SHERMAN,
SAM'EL HUNTINGTON,
WM. WILLIAMS,
OLIVER WOLCOTT.

New York
WM. FLOYD,
PHIL. LIVINGSTON,
FRANS. LEWIS,
LEWIS MORRIS.

New Jersey
RICHD. STOCKTON,
JNO. WITHERSPOON,
FRAS. HOPKINSON,
JOHN HART,
ABRA. CLARK.

Pennsylvania
ROBT. MORRIS
BENJAMIN RUSH,
BENJA. FRANKLIN,
JOHN MORTON,
GEO. CLYMER,
JAS. SMITH,
GEO. TAYLOR,
JAMES WILSON,
GEO. ROSS.

Delaware
CAESAR RODNEY,
GEO. READ,
THO. M'KEAN.

Maryland
SAMUEL CHASE,
WM. PACA,
THOS. STONE,
CHARLES CARROLL
of Carrollton.

Virginia
GEORGE WYTHE,
RICHARD HENRY LEE,
TH. JEFFERSON,
BENJA. HARRISON,
THS. NELSON, JR.,
FRANCIS LIGHTFOOT LEE,
CARTER BRAXTON.

North Carolina
WM. HOOPER,
JOSEPH HEWES,
JOHN PENN.

South Carolina
EDWARD RUTLEDGE,
THOS. HAYWARD, JUNR.,
THOMAS LYNCH, JUNR.,
ARTHUR MIDDLETON.

Georgia
BUTTON GWINNETT,
LYMAN HALL,
GEO. WALTON.