



***A Few Words on the Declaration of Independence***  
***Prepared by History Teacher, Greg Balan***

As we are approaching the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, this occasion prompts us to reflect on the lasting importance of this historic milestone. Our Founding creed deserves much more than the occasional reflection during a single national holiday. As a self-governing people, we should aspire to intimately understand what Lincoln called our “political religion.”<sup>1</sup> The goal of this short primer of the Declaration of Independence is to remind us of the historical and philosophical facts and ideas associated with the Declaration, so that we will refresh and renew our commitment to its lofty and timeless ideals—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Declaration of Independence was, and remains today, a radical and world-changing document. Conceptions of the role of government and liberty have throughout recorded history, but the Enlightenment brought these topics into sharper focus. Our Declaration of Independence went beyond the inspiring theories of the Enlightenment and marked the first time that such theories of governance and individual natural rights were linked to a particular movement for independence and were used as the foundational context for the birth of a new nation. Thomas Jefferson noted that the Declaration was “intended to be an expression of the American mind...”<sup>2</sup> The Founders understood that they were doing something historic, but it is unlikely that they could have foreseen what Jefferson’s immortal words would one day accomplish. The Committee of Five selected by the Continental Congress to draft the Declaration of Independence included the internationally famous Ben Franklin and political heavyweights like John Adams and Roger Sherman, but they recognized Jefferson’s eloquent radicalism and deferred to him to write the Declaration. As its chief author, Jefferson elevated political theory to poetry, and provided a basis for countless idealistic movements over the subsequent 247 years that have extended independence, rights, justice, and opportunity to all.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln. “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions (Lyceum Address)”. Speech, January 27, 1838. From Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/lyceum-address/>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson. “Letter to Henry Lee”. Letter, May 8, 1825. From Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-henry-lee/>.

The Declaration's relevance and appeal beyond its historical context are rooted in its multiple goals. On the one hand, the Declaration of Independence had to do just that—declare independence. Jefferson had multiple audiences in mind, including the British, his own countrymen, and any foreign powers that may have provided assistance to the Patriots during the war. Declaring independence required justification as the Patriots did not want to be viewed as mere rebels. Being labeled a rebel would be demeaning to the natural rights that the Patriots were defending, and it would discourage foreign aid from imperial powers wary of potential rebellions in their own territories. As a result, Jefferson explicitly lays out the grounds for declaring independence and, in so doing, justifies why we should be respected as a separate nation.

The grievances that Jefferson lists are all historically demonstrable acts of King George III and/or Parliament that represent violations of the royal coronation oath and British constitutional liberties as documented in Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights. For example, Jefferson takes aim at the Royal Proclamations of 1763 and 1765, which blocked American settlement west of the Appalachians, the Quebec Act, which extended French Canadian jurisdiction through the Ohio country rather than American colonists, and the Quartering Acts, which forced Americans to house and feed British soldiers without compensation. Jefferson submits the Royal Proclamation of 1775, which declared the American colonists out of the King's protection, and the funding by Parliament and deployment by George III of Hessian mercenaries as proof not only of tyrannical behavior, but that the British government chose violent separation from the colonies. Interestingly, in Jefferson's original drafts of the Declaration, he also denounces the King for introducing slavery into the colonies and suppressing colonial efforts to eradicate slavery.<sup>3</sup> Sadly this section of the Declaration was removed over Jefferson's repeated protests at the behest of the South Carolina and Georgia delegates to the Continental Congress. Its original inclusion by Jefferson and the agreement with it by 11 of the 13 original colonies indicates the unenviable balancing act between acknowledging the wrongness of slavery and maintaining the Union against the British Empire. This was the stark reality that the Founders were forced to contend with and so they compromised on slavery to ensure that one day there would be the possibility of correcting this national tragedy.

Jefferson and the others responsible for the Declaration of Independence were simultaneously products of their time and visionaries that opened up future possibilities that were not, and still are not, guaranteed. Jefferson immortalized our ideals on parchment and the Continental Congress declared them to the world in July 1776. A nation had never before been established on the radical concept of equality of citizens, and their individual natural liberty to pursue what makes them happy; not a single nation in all of recorded history could make that claim prior to July 1776. What we declared inalienable rights had always been considered mere privileges extended or removed by the political regime in control of a country. Without this valiant departure from the historical norm, it is uncertain when or if mankind would ever have overthrown the burdens of oppressive government.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson. "Draft of The Declaration of Independence". Declaration, July 04, 1776. From Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/draft-of-the-declaration-of-independence-2/>.

Virtually every revolution of liberation since 1776 has been inspired by the words of the Declaration of Independence. The self-evident truths that Jefferson wrote down were not for him alone, or those like him. The great movement for abolition and the achievement of a more justly equal society in the centuries since 1776 tapped directly into the words and spirit of the Declaration. Jefferson was a scholar of Anglo-Saxon philology and history and was intimately versed in the origins of English. His use of “Men” in the declaration harkens back to the original Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word—a human being.<sup>4</sup> The universality of the Declaration makes it most powerful. As it speaks to universal truths, it stands above everyone, including its author and those who ushered it into history. Americans have struggled with upholding our ideals, but our progress is undeniable. Our history, like that of all peoples, is littered with our failures. But like all histories, it is also marked by our triumphs. The future, unknown to our Founders, is likewise unknown to us, but we have eternal ideals to guide us. It is incumbent upon us to understand the ideals transmitted to us from the past and to carry them forward into the future so that posterity can enjoy the benefits of the Declaration’s truths.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/man>.