The Origins, Purpose and Legacy of the Declaration

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"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."

The ideas behind these famous words from the Declaration of Independence were not original to Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Roger Sherman (1721-1793), and Robert Livingston (1746-1813). These men, appointed by the Continental Congress in June 1776 to draft the document calling for the thirteen American colonies to be free of Great Britain, drew their ideas from the times in which they lived and from the classical world. They created a unique work which both responded to the issues of the day and had a profound influence on future generations.

CHILDREN OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

The American revolutionaries lived, dreamed and thought in an intellectual period during the 1700s known as the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. The Western world at this time was a hotbed of science, learning and inquiry using the then-new "scientific method." The key belief underlying this great expansion of human knowledge was that the entire universe was an orderly place governed by "natural laws" (such as the law of gravity). These laws, it was held, could be discovered by careful observation and reasoning.

Political thinkers, too, sought to apply reason, order and "natural law" to the design of government. Such ideas were not totally original to the time, however. They were rooted in the orderly and systematic philosophies of ancient Rome.

AN ENTIRE PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT

Jefferson and his colleagues brought these influences to bear on the task of stating clearly what the Continental Congress had already agreed upon: that the American colonies would henceforth be independent of Great Britain.

The Declaration of Independence opens with a long sentence indicating that the rebellious colonists felt they owed the world an explanation of their actions. It then launches into its most wide-ranging and widely influential section. Here, in only a few sentences, the Declaration outlines an entire philosophy of government.

"All men are created equal," it asserts, with certain natural, God-given rights. Governments are created by men "to secure those rights." Governments derive all their power from the people they
govern, the Declaration goes on to argue, and are only valid when they have the consent of those people. If a government "becomes destructive" of its people's rights, its citizens may (and indeed should) change their government or abolish it and create a new and better government.

Much of this philosophy, ironically, had originated in England a century earlier, during the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, when the English removed from office a king they thought was a tyrant and replaced him with a limited monarchy expected to be more respectful of their rights. Thus in 1776 the current king of Great Britain, George III (1738-1820), was well familiar with the concept that government is a "social contract" between governor and governed, and should be limited in its powers. (Although the words "social contract" are most famously associated with the book of the same name by the 18th-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the ideas behind them had been articulated earlier by the English writer John Locke (1632-1704) in connection with the Glorious Revolution.) It is certain, however, that King George did not agree that he was, as the Declaration put it, a tyrant.

MAKING A CASE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The Declaration's most urgent purpose was to convince colonists to support freedom from George's tyranny. This was not an easy choice for the colonists to make. To support independence was treason, and the penalty for treason was death. Independence would also mean war—a war in the colonists' own backyards, with all the hardships that war can bring.

The Declaration's authors were not the only ones trying to convince the colonists to risk hardship for independence, however. Other writers, both before and after the Declaration, also sought to persuade the colonists to favor it. Among them were Samuel Adams (1722-1803) and John Adams (1735-1826) (both of whom signed the Declaration of Independence) and the spirited, widely influential writer Thomas Paine (1737-1809).

The Declaration makes its case against continued loyalty to the King in a long section after its sweeping, theoretical beginning. Here it lists the specific "injuries and usurpations" allegedly committed by King George against the colonists.

The list of accusations includes abuses that the colonists would, after the Revolution, take particular care to protect against in their new nation: "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," and taken action "for imposing Taxes on us without our Consent: For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury: . . . [and] For suspending our Legislatures."

Some of the Declaration's accusations against the King were more passionate than precise; for example: "He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt out towns, and destroyed the lives of our people." The Declaration was intended to appeal not only to the minds but also to the hearts of the colonists. Emotion as well as reason were called upon in the effort to persuade the colonists to support revolution wholeheartedly.
The King’s offenses against the colonists, the Declaration asserts, added up to plenty of justification for the colonists to break free of England. Many previous attempts by the colonists to work out improved relations between colony and crown had failed, the document says.

Therefore, the Declaration announces, "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States" with no ties of government or loyalty to England.

IMMEDIATE EFFECT

Many colonists greeted the news that their representatives in the Continental Congress had declared independence with great celebrations and demonstrations of approval. Treason or not, these Patriots, or Whigs (as they were known) not only favored independence but were willing to muster an armed resistance to the large force of English soldiers and mercenaries being assembled to defend the king’s interests in America.

Other colonists strongly criticized the movement for independence, preferring to remain loyal to their King. Many of these Tories (as the Loyalists were also known) supported the efforts of the British troops during the Revolutionary War.

In England, news of the Declaration of Independence was taken very seriously indeed. Many quickly recognized that this was not just the ranting of obscure pamphleteers. Much of the Declaration’s power and influence came from the individuals who had chosen to sign it. These included some of the most important and respected men in the colonies. Independence had been declared by the colonies’ men of property, power, and influence. It meant war.

WIDER INFLUENCE

The Declaration of Independence was not a detailed blueprint for government. Other documents in circulation at the time echoed the Declaration’s ideals while also setting forth specifics that later made their way into the U.S. Constitution and other legislation. The Virginia Declaration of Rights, for example, provided the model for the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution). The Virginia Declaration of Rights also eventually became the model for declarations of human rights in France (during the French Revolution), and in our own 20th century for the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human rights.

Eventually, all of the nuts and bolts of government-making would be considered and debated by the new government’s architects in exhaustive detail. And the government makers would, eventually, seek and obtain the people’s approval for the new government they had designed.

THE IDEAL OF EQUALITY

The details of that design were not what the Declaration of Independence addressed. The key role of the Declaration in founding the new nation was to set the agenda for realizing a dream. While it reflected classical philosophy and the thinking of its day, it also proposed something unprecedented
in government-making—written, constitutional requirements that government respect "natural" rights and as the leading principle of the new nation, the ideal of equality.

The meaning of the Declaration’s most famous words has long been debated. Just what did Thomas Jefferson mean when he wrote that "all men are created equal?" Although in an earlier draft of the Declaration, Jefferson had condemned slavery, this language was taken out in the version approved by the Continental Congress. Even if slaves were created the equal of other men by God, they surely would not be treated equally in the independent "United Colonies." Nor did "all men" completely cover women, whose legal rights in the new nation would for many years be much more limited than those of men.

A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Jefferson’s gloriously inclusive language nonetheless has inspired generations of activists who have worked to make it a reality for more and more Americans. Bit by bit, over more than two centuries, the nation’s laws have been changed to recognize and protect the rights of African Americans, women, and others who have in the past been legally disadvantaged.

The Declaration of Independence also has offered inspiration to seekers of independence and democracy the world over, from 1776 to the present—from the leaders of the French Revolution, to Irish seeking independence from Great Britain, to nation builders in Italy, Germany, and Latin America, to the followers of Mahatma Gandhi who achieved India’s independence from Great Britain, to blacks in South Africa under apartheid and student activists seeking democracy in modern China. It is arguably the most influential political document ever written.

Further Readings

FURTHER RESOURCES

- **BOOKS**
  
  
  
  
  

- **MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC SITES**
  Freedom Trail. Boston, MA
  
  Independence National Historical Park. Philadelphia, PA