

Independence Forever: Why America Celebrates the Fourth of July

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The Fourth of July is a great opportunity to renew our dedication to the principles of liberty and equality enshrined in what Thomas Jefferson called “the declaratory charter of our rights.”

As a practical matter, the Declaration of Independence publicly announced to the world the unanimous decision of the American colonies to declare themselves free and independent states, absolved from any allegiance to Great Britain. But its greater meaning—then as well as now—is as a statement of the conditions of legitimate political authority and the proper ends of government, and its proclamation of a new ground of political rule in the sovereignty of the people. “If the American Revolution had produced nothing but the Declaration of Independence,” wrote the great historian Samuel Eliot Morrison, “it would have been worthwhile.”

Although Congress had appointed a distinguished committee—including John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston—the Declaration of Independence is chiefly the work of Thomas Jefferson. By his own account, Jefferson was neither aiming at originality nor taking from any particular writings but was expressing the “harmonizing sentiments of the day,” as expressed in conversation, letters, essays, or “the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” Jefferson intended the Declaration to be “an expression of the Ameri-

can mind,” and wrote so as to “place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent.”

The structure of the Declaration of Independence is that of a common law legal document. The ringing phrases of the document’s famous second paragraph are a powerful synthesis of American constitutional and republican government theories. All men have a right to liberty only in so far as they are by nature equal, which is to say none are naturally superior, and deserve to rule, or inferior, and deserve to be ruled. Because men are endowed with these rights, the rights are unalienable, which means that they cannot be given up or taken away. And because individuals equally possess these rights, governments derive their just powers from the consent of those governed. The purpose of government is to secure these fundamental rights and, although prudence tells us that governments should not be changed for trivial reasons, the people retain the right to alter or abolish government when it becomes destructive of these ends.

The remainder of the document is a bill of indictment accusing King George III of some 30 offenses, some constitutional, some legal, and some matters of policy. The combined charges against the king were intended to demonstrate a history of repeated injuries, all having the object of establishing “an absolute tyranny” over America. Although the colonists were

“disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable,” the time had come to end the relationship: “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.”

One charge that Jefferson had included, but Congress removed, was that the king had “waged cruel war against human nature” by introducing slavery and allowing the slave trade into the American colonies. A few delegates were unwilling to acknowledge that slavery violated the “most sacred rights of life and liberty,” and the passage was dropped for the sake of unanimity. Thus was foreshadowed the central debate of the American Civil War, which Abraham Lincoln saw as a test to determine whether a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” could long endure.

The Declaration of Independence and the liberties recognized in it are grounded in a higher law to which all human laws are answerable. This higher law can be understood to derive from reason—the truths of the Declaration are held to be “self-evident”—but also revelation. There are four references to God in the document: to “the laws of nature and nature’s God”; to all men being “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”; to “the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions”; and to “the protection of Divine Providence.” The first term suggests a deity that is knowable by human reason, but the others—God as creator, as judge, and as providence—are more biblical, and add a theological context to the document. “And can the liberties of a nation be thought

secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are a gift of God?” Jefferson asked in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

The true significance of the Declaration lies in its trans-historical meaning. Its appeal was not to any conventional law or political contract but to the equal rights possessed by all men and “the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and nature’s God” entitled them. What is revolutionary about the Declaration of Independence is not that a particular group of Americans declared their independence under particular circumstances but that they did so by appealing to—and promising to base their particular government on—a universal standard of justice. It is in this sense that Abraham Lincoln praised “the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.”

The ringing phrases of the Declaration of Independence speak to all those who strive for liberty and seek to vindicate the principles of self-government. But it was an aged John Adams who, when he was asked to prepare a statement on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, delivered two words that still convey our great hope every Fourth of July: “Independence Forever.”

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QUOTATIONS ON THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

I am well aware of the toil, and blood, and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this declaration, and support and defend these states. Yet, through all the gloom, I can see the rays of light and glory; I can see that the end is more than worth all the means, and that posterity will triumph.

John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776

There! His Majesty can now read my name without glasses. And he can double the reward on my head!

John Hancock (attributed), upon signing the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.

Benjamin Franklin (attributed), at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

The flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism; on the contrary, they will consume these engines and all who work them.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Adams, September 12, 1821

With respect to our rights, and the acts of the British government contravening those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American whigs thought alike on these subjects. When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825

Independence Forever.

John Adams, toast for the 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826

I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.

Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" July 5, 1852

The assertion that "all men are created equal" was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, thank God, it is now proving itself, a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people

back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.

Abraham Lincoln, speech on the Dred Scott Decision, June 26, 1857

We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

Abraham Lincoln, speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858

We live in an age of science and of abounding accumulation of material things. These did not create our Declaration. Our Declaration created them. The things of the spirit come first. Unless we cling to that, all our material prosperity, overwhelming though it may appear, will turn to a barren sceptre in our grasp. If we are to maintain the great heritage which has been bequeathed to us, we must be like-minded as the fathers who created it. We must not sink into a pagan materialism. We must cultivate the reverence which they had for the things that are holy. We must follow the spiritual and moral leadership which they showed. We must keep replenished, that they may glow with a more compelling flame, the altar fires before which they worshiped.

Calvin Coolidge, speech on the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 5, 1926

Today, 186 years later, that Declaration whose yellowing parchment and fading, almost illegible lines I saw in the past week in the National Archives in Washington is still a revolutionary document. To read it today is to hear a trumpet call. For that Declaration unleashed not merely a revolution against the British, but a revolution in human affairs. . . . The theory of independence is as old as man himself, and it was not invented in this hall. But it was in this hall that the theory became a practice; that the word went out to all, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, that “the God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.” And today this Nation—conceived in revolution, nurtured in liberty, maturing in independence—has no intention of abdicating its leadership in that worldwide movement for independence to any nation or society committed to systematic human oppression.

John F. Kennedy, address at Independence Hall, July 4, 1962

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . I have a

dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

Martin Luther King, “I Have A Dream,” August 28, 1963

Our Declaration of Independence has been copied by emerging nations around the globe, its themes adopted in places many of us have never heard of. Here in this land, for the first time, it was decided that man is born with certain God-given rights. We the people declared that government is created by the people for their own convenience. Government has no power except those voluntarily granted it by the people. There have been revolutions before and since ours, revolutions that simply exchanged one set of rulers for another. Ours was a philosophical revolution that changed the very concept of government.

Ronald Reagan, address at Yorktown, October 19, 1981

A NOTE ON THE SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

“...we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

(Each year information about those who signed the Declaration of Independence is circulated, not all of which is accurate. The following note is based on research in several established sources, which are noted below.)

Fifty-six individuals from each of the original 13 colonies participated in the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Pennsylvania sent nine delegates to the congress, followed by Virginia with seven and Massachusetts and New Jersey with five. Connecticut, Maryland, New York, and South Carolina each sent four delegates. Delaware, Georgia, New Hampshire, and North Carolina each sent three. Rhode Island, the smallest colony, sent only two delegates to Philadelphia.

Eight of the signers were immigrants, two were brothers, two were cousins, and one was an orphan. The average age of a signer was 45. The oldest delegate was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was 70 when he signed the Declaration. The youngest was Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina, who was 27.

Eighteen of the signers were merchants or businessmen, 14 were farmers, and four were doctors. Forty-two signers had served in their colonial legislatures. Twenty-two were lawyers—although William Hooper of North Carolina was “disbarred” when he spoke out

against the Crown—and nine were judges. Stephen Hopkins had been Governor of Rhode Island.

Although two others had been clergy previously, John Witherspoon of New Jersey was the only active clergyman to attend—he wore his pontificals to the sessions. Almost all were Protestant Christians; Charles Carroll of Maryland was the only Roman Catholic signer.

Seven of the signers were educated at Harvard, four each at Yale and William & Mary, and three at Princeton. John Witherspoon was the president of Princeton and George Wythe was a professor at William & Mary, where his students included the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson.

Seventeen of the signers served in the military during the American Revolution. Thomas Nelson was a colonel in the Second Virginia Regiment and then commanded Virginia military forces at the Battle of Yorktown. William Whipple served with the New Hampshire militia and was one of the commanding officers in the decisive Saratoga campaign. Oliver Wol-

cott led the Connecticut regiments sent for the defense of New York and commanded a brigade of militia that took part in the defeat of General Burgoyne. Caesar Rodney was a Major General in the Delaware militia and John Hancock was the same in the Massachusetts militia.

Five of the signers were captured by the British during the war. Captains Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, and Arthur Middleton (South Carolina) were all captured at the Battle of Charleston in 1780; Colonel George Walton was wounded and captured at the Battle of Savannah. Richard Stockton of New Jersey never recovered from his incarceration at the hands of British Loyalists and died in 1781.

Colonel Thomas McKean of Delaware wrote John Adams that he was “hunted like a fox by the enemy—compelled to remove my family five times in a few months, and at last fixed them in a little log house on the banks of the Susquehanna . . . and they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians.” Abraham Clark of New Jersey had two of his sons captured by the British during the war. The son of John Witherspoon, a major in the New Jersey Brigade, was killed at the Battle of Germantown.

Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Francis Lewis’s New York home was destroyed and his wife was taken prisoner. John Hart’s farm and mills were destroyed when the British invaded New Jersey and he died while fleeing capture. Carter Braxton and Thomas Nelson (both of Virginia) lent large sums of their personal fortunes to support the war effort, but were never repaid.

Fifteen of the signers participated in their states’ constitutional conventions, and six—Roger Sherman, Robert Morris, Benjamin Franklin, George Clymer, James Wilson, and George Reed—signed the United States Constitution. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts attended the federal convention and, though he later supported the document, refused to sign the Constitution.

After the Revolution, 13 of the signers went on to become governors, and 18 served in their state legislatures. Sixteen became state and federal judges. Seven became members of the United States House of Representatives, and six became United States Senators. James Wilson and Samuel Chase became Justices of the United States Supreme Court.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Elbridge Gerry each became Vice President, and John Adams and Thomas Jefferson became President. The sons of signers John Adams and Benjamin Harrison also became Presidents.

Five signers played major roles in the establishment of colleges and universities: Benjamin Franklin and the University of Pennsylvania; Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia; Benjamin Rush and Dickinson College; Lewis Morris and New York University; and George Walton and the University of Georgia.

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Carroll were the longest surviving signers. Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Carroll of Maryland was the last signer to die—in 1832 at the age of 95.

Sources: Robert Lincoln, *Lives of the Presidents of the United States, with Biographical Notices of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Brambleton Typographical Company, 1839); John and Katherine Bakeless, *Signers of the Declaration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969); *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989).

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