

Fresh Takes

on the Declaration of Independence

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.
A DECLARATION
BY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
IN GENERAL CONGRESS ASSEMBLED.

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 shewn, 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 Invasion from without, and Convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their Migrations 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 Offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary 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, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People.

He is, at this Time, transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat 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 Insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured 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 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 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 to 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 ORDER and in BEHALF of the CONGRESS,

JOHN HANCOCK, PRESIDENT.

ATTEST.
CHARLES THOMSON, SECRETARY.

PHILADELPHIA: PRINTED BY JOHN DUNLAP.

Fresh Takes

We sent an image of the Dunlap broadside, the first printing of the Declaration of Independence, to 24 scholars from across the country. They were asked to read the text of the Declaration — familiar to all and written about by most — and briefly respond.

Some noticed phrases that they hadn't fully considered before. Others were drawn to the grievances most connected to their own research or to current events. Still others were reminded of the Declaration's place in their own lives.

The Declaration of Independence is not just something to be recited on the 4th of July and put away until the following year. These fresh takes prove that the Declaration is a living document, worthy of continued conversation and thought.

Emily Sneff
Declaration Resources Project
June 2017

Image Credit for the Dunlap Broadside: [Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#) (Public Domain)

#decfreshtakes

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Like many historians, I respond reflexively to the Declaration of Independence as a historical document; I think of the historical context in which independence was declared, what the text meant to its authors, to its contemporary readers, and to those it excluded. But I feel it as an American, too. Historians live in the now as well as the past; in the politics and the civic rituals of the present, the essence of American democracy can feel both precious and elusive.

When my children were very small I led the reading of the Declaration of Independence at our neighborhood July 4th parties; when they were a little older, they did the reading. We read it aloud because it's a special document that sounds special, as even children wearing homemade tricorn hats can appreciate. Pauline Maier, one of the most incisive readers of the Declaration, called it American Scripture. Public embrace through ritual readings is part of the Declaration's power in that such readings can help to highlight our democracy's inherent contradictions. The first paragraph is a rationale for revolution, the list of grievances against King George III important as further justification, but it's that second paragraph of the preamble that packs all the rhetorical and epistemological punch.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident". The self-evident truth of equality among men and unalienable rights — historians wrestle over the contemporary meaning of each of these. People the world over daily rely on these ambiguous notions to empower a government we believe is historic and innovative in its conception even while *self-evidently* so often flawed in execution.

Karin Wulf

*Director, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture
Professor of History, College of William and Mary*



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Tiya Miles

*Mary Henrietta Graham Distinguished University Professor
University of Michigan*

I am always struck by the inherent tension between expansive radical thought and entrenched racial and gender bias within this lilted founding document. The Declaration of Independence proffers a litany of lofty values: truth, respect, prudence, honor, fact-finding, and righting the wrongs of suffering people, even as it fully embraces global engagement, looking to persuade a “candid World.” And yet, the narrow notion of “Mankind” fully ignores African Americans and edges out women of all races. The statement forever fixes in the national imaginary a picture of indigenous people, the first Americans, as “merciless Indian Savages”. As Edmund Morgan and others have elucidated, the United States was born of such contradictions.

While reading the statement afresh in 2017, I felt this tension once again, and yet I was taken with another quality in a moment when our National Endowment for the Humanities has been threatened with elimination. The Declaration of Independence was a public humanities project. Its authors worked in collaboration on the public dime. They infused the text with the influences of political philosophy, rhetoric, and religious studies. And that resonant opener: “When in the Course of human Events,” establishes the field of history (the study of human action in time) as a cornerstone of argumentation. The elite white men who gathered in 1776 to put their cause before the world produced a work inspired by a well of interdisciplinary thought. That transformative treatise was co-signed in theory, by the “People”, who labored then, and still do now, to make its principles real.



Caitlin Fitz

*Assistant Professor of History
Northwestern University*



Fittingly, I suppose, I'm smiling that the Declaration of Independence's authors listed "the Pursuit of Happiness" as an inalienable right. How luxurious! The gesture feels at once down to earth and above and beyond. But did the United States actually "effect ... Happiness", as the Declaration says? By the time Alexis de Tocqueville visited in the 1830s, he thought otherwise. White American men lived "in the happiest circumstances which the world affords," enjoying economic abundance and democratic freedoms unheard of in Europe. But "a cloud habitually hung upon their brow," the Frenchman wrote, and they seemed "serious and almost sad even in their pleasures."

Why so sad? Because in a society that promised so much, it seemed, white men had only themselves to blame if they didn't end up winners. Ostensibly the most privileged people on earth, these men felt saddled with the burden of great expectations, crippled by fear of failure, and aware that in the burgeoning capitalist economy, success might be fleeting and failure final. Democracy in De Tocqueville's America was often liberating, but it also fostered soulless materialism, restless anxiety, and existential despair. Like Kohelet in the biblical Ecclesiastes, American men who chased success were chasing the wind, only to die like everyone else.

It certainly wasn't inevitable that De Tocqueville's America would emerge from 1776. But the Revolution at least purported to offer white men a more meritocratic world, and meritocracy brings its own demons. We live with the consequences, pursuing happiness like Kohelet pursued the wind.

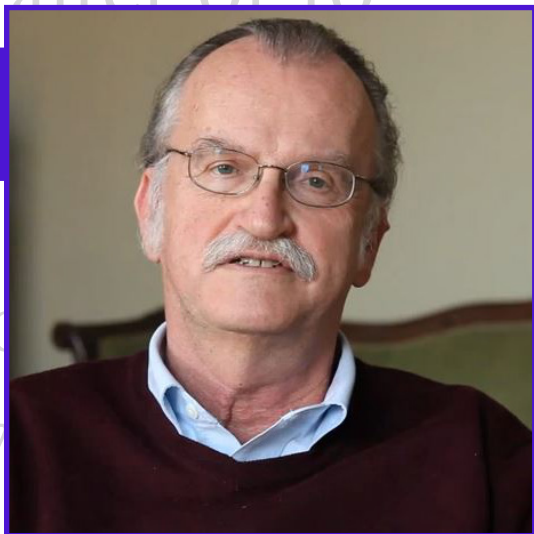


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The Declaration of Independence can and should be read many ways. Today, we tend to read up, from the rights-bearing individual to the creation of a legitimate government, deriving its “just Powers from the Consent of the Governed”. In the contemporaneous context, however, we might move in the opposite direction, from the larger whole to its constituent parts — from empire-breaking to nation-making. The bulk of the Declaration chronicles the many ways King George III abused his authority, sometimes combining with “others [that is, Parliament] to subject us to a Jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution”. But who exactly are the signers of this bold document, and for whom do they speak? Why would “the Powers of the Earth” acknowledge the legitimacy of American claims?

Jefferson and his colleagues knew those “Powers” considered the rebellious provinces an integral part of Britain’s empire. They had no interest in sanctioning the kind of “rights-talk” that jeopardized their own regimes, nor would independent Americans prove eager to sponsor separatist movements. The Declaration’s important message was instead that the new, self-declared nation was capable of mobilizing its people to make war. The fact that the Revolution was already more than a year old gave that claim substance.

The Declaration enabled Revolutionaries to recognize each other as Americans, willing to sacrifice everything for their country. But their bid to become an independent people would only succeed if the other powers — including Britain — recognized them as such. Military and political mobilization made Americans a recognizable people, to themselves and to the world.



Peter Onuf



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“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal”. These words are striking. The Declaration of Independence asserts that we are equal, despite living in a very unequal society, because all people “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”. We each therefore have an equal claim to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”.

Yet the Declaration is not just about individuals, but also about the communities that we inhabit. Rights are precarious in the state of nature. Thus, “to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men”. But is it enough for government to “secure” these rights? Or does living together demand more of us?

The Declaration argues that we must do more. When a people establish government, they organize “its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” To effect is to bring about or make possible. The Declaration asks readers to envision a government that can both protect rights and promote happiness.

We cannot pursue happiness unless we develop our capacities as human beings and have meaningful choices about the kinds of lives that we lead. All Americans must therefore have access to resources and opportunities that enable pursuits of happiness, including, for example, education, or work that encourages self-development.

The Declaration thus urges us to think not just about our rights, but also about the nature of our polity. What do we owe each other so that each of us might flourish?

Johann Neem

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Western Washington University*





Robert Allison

*Professor of History
Suffolk University*

The Declaration of Independence does not mention democracy, republics, or freedom. It does not suggest any particular way to organize a government. But it is all about government. First, it says that people create governments to protect their rights to life, to liberty, and to pursue happiness. Second, it has much to say about what governments should not do.

The list of charges against the King — the “long Train of Abuses and Usurpations” which show a path to despotism — are examples of how not to govern. Each charge involves an act of government. Judges are made dependent on the King; legislators are forced to meet at uncomfortable places distant from the public records; legislatures dissolved, so the law-making power “incapable of Annihilation” reverts to the people, leaving the state exposed to danger from without and within; new offices and officers created to eat out the people’s substance; the military is set over the civil power.

The Declaration blames the King, but Parliament was the real instigator (“He has combined with others to subject us to a Jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution”). The great palladium of liberty, its origins traced to Magna Carta, its triumphant moment in England’s Bill of Rights, the Parliament itself had turned despotic, and the British people, too, were deaf to Americans’ calls for justice.



The Declaration is a reminder of government’s purpose — to secure rights. That the British government — the world’s freest in 1776 — acted tyrannically, was the Declaration’s most somber warning.

Alejandra Dubcovsky

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Reading the Declaration of Independence afresh in 2017 surprised me. On the one hand, it was a very familiar text; one I had read many times before. But as I moved past the introduction and beyond the weighty opening line of the preamble, I was struck by the caution and severity of the document. Even as the Declaration insists on the “unalienable Rights” of people, it assumes that there is nothing natural or given about independence or about the struggle needed to obtain and defend freedom. As the document argues for a new, more responsive, and transparent form of government, it maintains that “Prudence” and restraint should lead the way. As such, the Declaration follows its own advice, justifying and contextualizing its radical statements with a long list of both grievances and the attempts made to redress them.

But the Declaration recognizes that presenting facts of wrongdoing “to a candid World” will not be enough. The Declaration warns that people will often choose oppression rather than risk upsetting the balance of power at hand: “that mankind are more disposed to suffer... than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” Governments will not change easily or willingly, the document reminds us. Change will be hard, trying, and even bloody. But when the government, in 1776 or 2017, fails to protect its own people, acts against the interests of those it vowed to serve, and refuses to acquiesce to the demands of its people, change is not only necessary, it is also the right course of action.



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 Ufurpations, 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

Take the Fresh Takes Challenge!

Read the Declaration of Independence (it's only 1,320 words!) and respond.

SHARE your response with us by emailing us, or tweeting with **#decfreshtakes**

Want to read more?

If a page has this icon, click to see the contributor's latest book related to the Declaration of Independence



Having to take a fresh look at a document one has worked with, as a scholar, for nearly half a century is not the simplest task. One's initial temptation is to look for a statement one has ignored or largely forgotten, or anything that catches one's eye. So my initial temptation was to discuss the charge that the King has "sent hither Swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance", in part because this phrasing is so vivid, and in part because this passage badly mischaracterizes how the Empire actually functioned.

But on my second pass, I prefer to say something about the third specific charge against the King: that "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". I like this clause in part because it indirectly implicates the fundamental constitutional controversy underlying the Revolution, vizt., the relation between Parliament's claim to be able to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever", and the Americans' repeated insistence on their right to "actual" representation in their own equitably apportioned legislatures. But more important, this is arguably the one clause that echoes most directly in our own political (and constitutional) affairs, because the manipulation of the rules and techniques of redistricting, at both the national and state levels of government, has had such a profound and inimical impact on our politics.

Jack Rakove

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Gautham Rao

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The Declaration of Independence. Or is it Declarations of Independence?

There is the elegance of one Declaration's announcement of the dissolution of "Political Bands" that once united Americans and Britons. There is the stridence of the prosecutorial case against the King-in-Parliament. There is the paradoxical probity of a third Declaration assuring the world of Americans' respect for the rule of law. And then there is a fourth Declaration's blueprint for a new American state.

Which Declaration is paramount? I cannot really say. Reflecting back on only the few years I have been teaching about the Declaration of Independence, I've emphasized the different Declarations at different moments in time. But that is not true of Americans more broadly for whom the first Declaration will always reign supreme. This is partly because of the beauty of those two paragraphs but more so because it is the only part of the document that celebrates independence. The rest tells us how Americans remained dependent – on morality, on the law, and on the state.



Seth Cotlar

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The Declaration of Independence is a document at odds with itself, projecting two competing visions of America. In the second paragraph we find the famous assertion that “all Men [sic] are created equal”. These words, stamped onto the very parchment which conjured the nation into existence, stand as the “promissory note” that Martin Luther King, Jr. and countless other progressives have called upon the nation to redeem. This long-deferred promise and the diverse, multi-generational cohort of Americans who have agitated for its ever-unfolding fulfillment comprise, to my mind, the best of the American political tradition. America announced its nationhood by making an unprecedented commitment to an aspirational ideal, the ideal of fundamental human equality.

But as we read on, the tenor of the document gets more fearful and foreboding. The Declaration’s long list of complaints reveals a polity that perceives itself as under siege, and not just by a British King and Parliament that have suspended the legal and political traditions that had previously protected colonists’ liberties. The Declaration speaks for a nation of Protestants who fear what they perceive to be the creeping Catholic totalitarianism of the Quebec Act. The Declaration speaks for a nation of whites who fear that British officers are fomenting a rebellion amongst enslaved people. The Declaration speaks for a nation of upwardly-mobile white farmers frustrated with the British government’s refusal to let them encroach upon lands owned and occupied by Native American nations. This is a colonizing nation, a racialized nation, a nation uncomfortable with diversity and difference of all sorts. It is a nation unable to perceive the aspirations of various “others” – Catholics, Native Americans, enslaved people – as anything other than a threat. The universalistic language about fundamental human equality, by the time one gets to the end of the document, has receded quite far into the rearview mirror.

We can arguably see the last 250 years of American history as an ongoing quarrel between these two visions of nationhood voiced in the Declaration – the nation of equality and the nation of exclusion, the nation of aspirational ideals and the nation of unleashed self-interest pursued at the expense of those with less power. Like every previous generation, it is up to us to decide which vision of America will serve as our inspiration.



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Manuel Covo

*Assistant Professor of History
University of California, Santa Barbara*



The universal principles set out in the first paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence always surprise me. Certainly because of my upbringing, and perhaps out of unconscious patriotism, I tend to think that the real claim to have produced a manifesto for humankind is French, enshrined in another text – the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. I was taught in France that the US document was an opportunistic move centered on unpaid taxes and chests of tea: it was barely an introduction to what would follow, in monumental proportions, with the French Revolution.

Yet, minimizing the significance of the Declaration of Independence is deeply unfair. “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” sound more modern than the French “liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression”. The words of the Declaration are powerful, but should be taken with a grain of salt in the context of a slaveholding republic. Well, the same can be said about the French case, where the abolition of privileges in 1789 did not directly lead to the abolition of slavery – slaves in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) had to take this matter into their own hands in the uprisings of 1791.

Celebratory historical narratives of the United States and France lay their claims of universalism on two profoundly inspiring documents, although neither country met the standards that it had set down for itself on paper. Therefore, reading the Declaration of Independence from a French perspective does not lead me to understand 1776 as the first chapter of another revolution to come, but points towards shared radicalism and common contradictions hidden behind national mythologies.

Kathleen DuVal

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University of North Carolina*



One of the Declaration of Independence's charges against King George III is that he was anti-immigrant, that he limited the colonial population by discouraging immigration and naturalization. To the colonists, European immigrants were not a threatening group that, as some Americans fear today, would take their jobs, drain their resources, or increase crime. Immigrants were vital to the economic growth and geographic expansion of the British colonies. British colonists especially valued Protestant European immigrants, who could aid their resistance against the powerful American Indians who still controlled most of the continent and against the Catholic empires of France and Spain. When King George "endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States" by refusing to approve laws "to encourage their Migrations hither," he provided evidence of his determination to keep the colonies backwards and even vulnerable to external threat.

When Americans won their independence, they reversed these policies. Nearly 100,000 Europeans immigrated into the United States in the 1790s alone. The Alien Acts, passed under John Adams, were as unpopular as the King's restrictions, and they helped defeat Adams and the Federalists in the election of 1800. Through immigration, natural increase, and the slave trade, the U.S. population grew from 1.5 million in 1750 to an astounding 7.2 million in 1810.

The final clause of this charge reminds us that the lands to which European immigration (and forced African migration) came were in no way empty. King George had further discouraged immigration by "raising the Conditions of new Appropriations of Land." His Proclamation Line, enacted to appease Indians and prevent disastrous and expensive conflicts like Pontiac's War, put restrictions on colonial land grabs in the west. Those restrictions would be one of the reasons British colonists penned this list of grievances and went on to revolution.



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Generations of Americans have memorized the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence as a rhetorical model. In a majestic sequence of lilting clauses, Thomas Jefferson sways the reader toward the pivotal lines —“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal” — so that the radicalism of the proposition appears to be as measured as the cadence in which it is delivered. If reason has a voice, this is what it sounds like.

Like all the best rhetoric, Jefferson’s words are effective because they’re manipulative. To support the sweeping claims of the opening paragraphs, he summons up a long list of “Facts... submitted to a candid World.” The text turns from a grand assertion of Enlightenment values into a charge sheet against King George III. The syntax tips into short declarative sentences; a cascade of active verbs tumbles out. Abolishing, depriving, suspending, cutting off. Refused, forbidden, dissolved, obstructed. Plundered, ravaged, burnt, and destroyed. If violence were a person, this is how it would act.

Jefferson’s list of “facts” are the eighteenth-century equivalent of the blaring chyrons on Fox News or MSNBC: their truth is subordinated to their tone. Though they’re called “facts,” in line with the Declaration’s appeal to reason, the list of charges goes for the emotional jugular, inviting fear, alarm, outrage.

The Declaration plants a paradox at the heart of American political culture. Reason, or at least an approximation of it, may have generated the principles on which our government was framed; but emotion, or at least an appeal to it, generated the revolution. The “facts” have always been in quotes.



Maya Jasanoff

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Why doesn't the Dunlap broadside have a better hold on the popular imagination? The image of the Declaration of Independence most people have is not this first publicly disseminated version. Instead, what most people picture is more like the other version of the Declaration Congress ordered made in July 1776, the engrossed copy on parchment with signatures. Why is this? I would argue that the visual and the material, particularly when the Dunlap broadside is compared to other copies of the Declaration Congress commissioned in 1776-1777, have something to do with this.

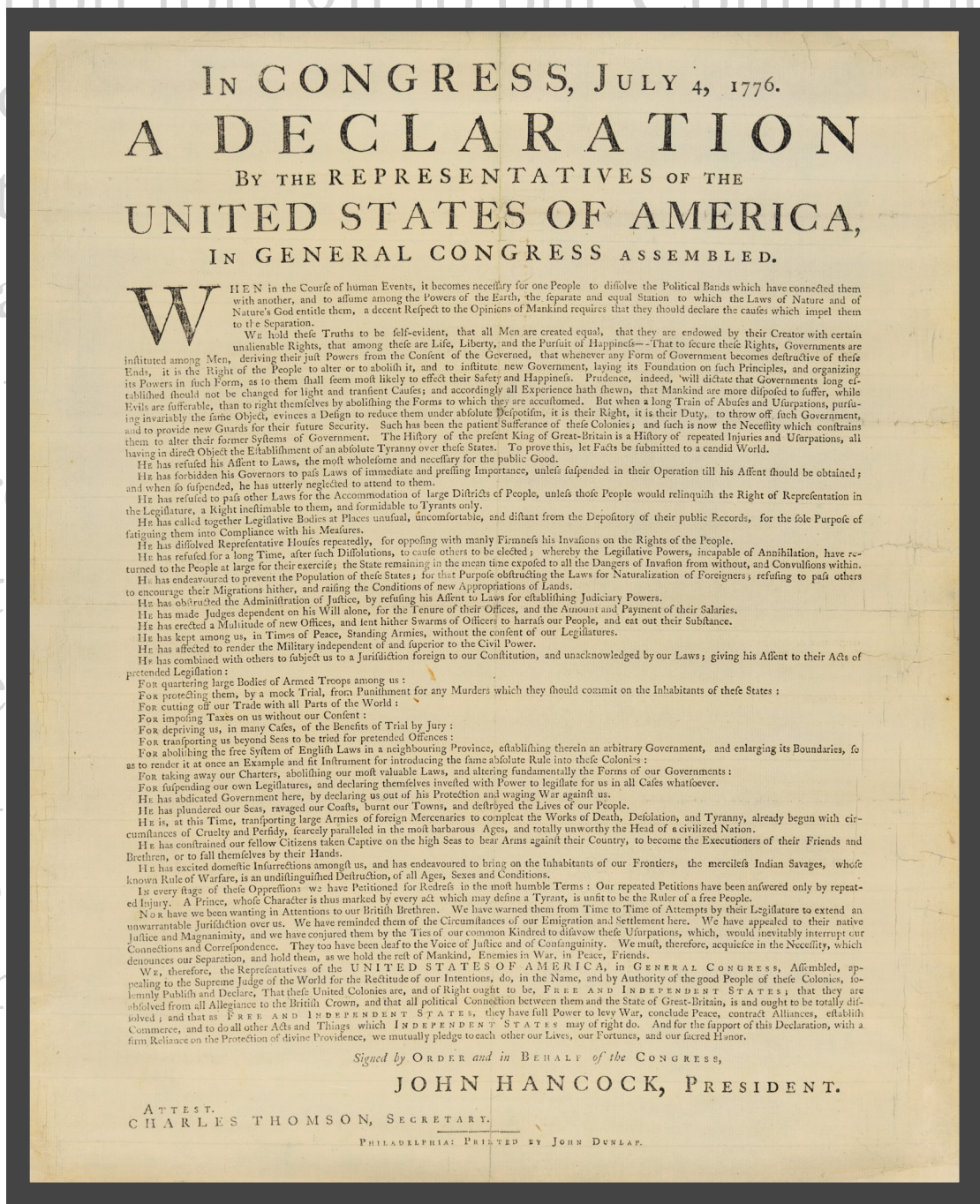
The Dunlap broadside is elegant in its stark clarity. Unlike Mary Katherine Goddard's 1777 broadside, the Dunlap broadside does not have any decorative elements; not a single printer's ornament enlivens it. What dominates it visually are the 37 clipped lines of accusatory grievances that take up most of its space. Each grievance is visually demarcated, set off by indents of repetitive visual motifs of the capitalized words "HE" or "FOR." Its beauty is in the easy digestibility of its argument; a clipped list of grievances as easily grasped by the reading eye as the listening ear. Has its visual and material nature caused its relative lack of popular fame? The official engrossed copy ordered by Congress July 19 is (mostly) one continuous paragraph, with grievances marked off from one another by horizontal lines that flow into the next word. To the eye, this document looks like a narrative rather than a litany.

No matter how decorative or plain, broadsides — made of paper, tacked onto walls, passed hand to hand — were by the nature of their material and use ephemeral. The engrossed copy, by contrast, held the associative gravitas of other legally binding contracts "signed, sealed, and delivered" on parchment or vellum. Perhaps Americans have preferred not to privilege what the Dunlap broadside visually and materially embodied: that the Declaration was as much a litany of grievances as an assertion of natural rights, and that even this most sacred of founding documents was once "breaking news" ephemera.

Zara Anishanslin

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More on the Dunlap Broadside

By order of the Continental Congress, John Dunlap produced the first printing of the Declaration of Independence on the night of July 4th

Dunlap's printing office was at the corner of 2nd and High (Market) Streets in Philadelphia, just blocks away from the State House (Independence Hall)

Only 26 copies of the Dunlap broadside are known to exist today, including 3 copies in the United Kingdom

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The Declaration of Independence is a reflection on the nature of commerce and Confederation. As a historian, I always think about a text in relation to its institutional, social, and political contexts. Since the early 18th century commentators from all levels of society worried about how to create a powerful state that would simultaneously promote prosperity for the greatest number of people. Much of the Declaration is a condemnation of the government of King George III, whose “repeated Injuries and Usurpations” tended towards “the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.” To remedy this, the Founders felt they needed to alter “their former Systems of Government.” It was no longer possible, in the view of the authors of the Declaration, for the British Empire to promote “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” the ends for which government was created.

What were these policies that demonstrated the inefficacy of the British government? That is the question which most of the Declaration is devoted to answering. Two complaints, usually ignored by commentators, reveal the political economic model endorsed by America’s Founders and their political allies in Britain. The Founders denounced George III and his government for obstructing immigration to North America. George III had “endeavored to prevent the population of these states” by preventing naturalization and putting an end to substantial subsidies “to encourage” various peoples “migrations hither”. The authors of the Declaration also complained that George III’s governments had cut “off our trade with all parts of the world.” These two statements add up to a remarkable understanding of political economy. Whereas ministerial spokesmen in the 1760s and 1770s invariably prized the colonies for the raw materials – tobacco, rice, cotton, sugar – they could produce to benefit the Mother Country, the Founders insisted that people rather than products made the colonies valuable. This was both because they believed that labor was key to producing value, and because they understood prosperity to depend on the interplay between production and consumption. There could be no consumption, and hence no prosperity, without an increasing population. Similarly whereas George III’s governments restricted colonial trade to insure that the valuable raw materials came to Britain, the colonists believed that only by exporting foodstuffs to Spanish and French American colonies could they gain the Spanish coin necessary to lubricate the North American consumer economy.

The new “Form of Government” established by the American Founders was explicitly confederal. The polity would be both “United” and composed of “States.” But this confederation would be stronger and more activist than earlier confederations – from the Amphictyonic League to the Dutch Republic. The new American confederation would uniquely conduct foreign policy and “establish Commerce”. The American Founders felt that a new political form – an activist confederation – was necessary to promote the prosperity necessary to make equality possible.



Example and fit
Instrument for
introducing the
fame 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

Each time I reread the Declaration of Independence, I am struck by its power to inspire me anew. I feel moved, as if I were one of the readers of the 1776 broadside or of an audience that heard it read aloud that year in town squares.

Most resonant for me is how the Continental Congress used the document to establish a representative polity. Unlike any government that came before it, this one would be beholden to the people. It was formed for their safety and happiness. The Declaration breathes the tradition of inalienable rights, enjoyed by all mankind. To secure those rights, even the dangers of revolution seemed appropriate to undertake, to throw off the yoke of tyranny and to empower individuals to pursue their dreams and happiness. There was no telling on that fateful day of July 4, 1776, how the gambit would come off, whether all the signatories would hang on the gibbet, whether they'd receive much needed foreign assistance, and whether the states would succeed in international markets after being cut off from British trade.

One thing was certain: The deputies of the people were taking a stand for their constituents to break the yoke of authority, to be represented by politicians of their choosing, to enjoy a free judiciary, and to begin anew. Little could the signatories know that the document would become the standard for abolitionists, free laborers, and feminists seeking a better world, one truer to the founding's stated message.



Alexander Tsesis



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"He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People." These were but a few of the grievances lodged by American colonists against King George III. As Virginia statesman Thomas Jefferson drafted what would become an iconic document, he was succinct yet poetic in his explanation for a formal separation from the British. The rationale centered upon natural rights, rights that were unalienable and intended for men like Jefferson and the other editors of the Declaration of Independence such as John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. The document stated, "all Men are created equal" and these men were entitled to the privileges of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness". The Declaration would mark a permanent fracture between a mother country and her rebellious colonial enterprise.

General George Washington received the news of the Declaration with excitement, and made certain that his troops, already stationed in New York, would hear the uplifting prose that signaled the birth of a new nation. The enthusiastic response to the Declaration was palpable, sending Washington's troops to celebrate by taking to the streets and toppling a statue of King George III.

But not all of the General's men would respond to the Declaration of Independence with such delight. The enslaved men who remained at Mount Vernon and who followed Washington's every command, understood the inherent contradictions in the demands put forth by slave holding congressmen. Some of the 135 enslaved people for whom General Washington had paid a tax, were marked by the trauma of the Middle Passage. Others remembered the stories of their parents and grandparents who passed down the memories of a ravaged West African coastline, the kidnapping of men, women, and children, and the murder and rape of countless Africans. A fifth of America's population understood the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence all too well, and unlike Washington's troops, they found little reason to celebrate.

Erica Armstrong Dunbar

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Carla Gardina Pestana

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My undergraduates enjoy some familiarity with the Declaration of Independence. Excepting a few foreign students every year, they all know the “self-evident” truths contained in paragraph two: “created equal” and “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”. These ideas offer much fodder for discussion: who was covered by “all Men”; what did equality mean in that context; and why emphasize “the Pursuit of Happiness” over the more common right to property.

Yet I focus on the long central section listing abuses that King George allegedly perpetrated against the residents of British North America. Students can anticipate some of the issues: taxation, for instance, was a well-known concern. Other complaints warrant discussion, such as the way the authors characterize Native Americans (as “merciless Indian Savages whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction of all”); or the outrage over allegations that the king blocked foreign immigration.

However illuminating the specific complaints, I emphasize why the authors felt the need to list their grievances. The complaints proved that George III had relinquished his right to rule, leaving them free to form an independent nation. Although we read it as a symbol of new nationhood, the Declaration at the time constituted a legalistic appeal to the international community. Noting that the revolutionaries faced a pressing need for allies, we discuss how they asserted their right to throw off British rule. The Declaration addressed other governments, justifying founding a new nation. That purpose for the document, so important at the time, has been largely forgotten.

Robert Parkinson

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Whenever I read the Declaration of Independence, my thoughts always go to the words that aren't there. There are some drastic differences between Jefferson's rough draft and the official Declaration text as approved by the Continental Congress on the 4th. They famously gave Jefferson great pains as Congress sliced them out, and they should us, as well. In what would have been America's final grievance at their treatment by King George, Jefferson denounced slavery. It is worth reminding ourselves of the impassioned phrases and stirring images he invoked to do so. This is the Declaration we long for.

"He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere," Jefferson began in one of the most sustained assaults on the morality of slavery in the eighteenth century. Congress, in their editing sessions of July 2-3, decimated this section of Jefferson's draft. The reasons historians have attributed for why they did so mostly involve the hypocrisy of Jefferson's blaming George III for all the generations of American plantation slavery. The Declaration's accusations could not end with so ludicrous a charge. However, they did not eliminate it entirely. What they did keep was very significant. Congress cut everything but seven words. All the passion, polemic, and indictment was drained off, and they simply merged it with the one before. Jefferson's attack on slavery became "He has excited domestic Insurrections amongst us..."

In doing so, Congress made a trade – an essential one for them and a tragic one for us. They parried Jefferson's thrust against slavery in order to cement the union. Jefferson's words were more dangerous than just being ridiculed as silly: they had destructive potential to offend slaveowners and put stress on the fragile union. By cutting *almost* all of them, they avoided those dangers and yet blamed the king for the rampant stories of potential slave insurrections that roiled the southern colonies throughout 1775-1776.

Fifty years on, abolitionists embraced the language of equality in the Declaration's second paragraph and tried to extend its meaning. When I think of what William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, or the Tappan brothers and the Grimke sisters might have done with phrases like "an assemblage of horrors," "piratical warfare," and "cruel war against human nature," I mourn their loss. Perhaps, just perhaps, they might not have needed them. Nor a civil war that killed more than 600,000 Americans.



taken Captive
gh
ear
nft
ne
Executioners
of their Friends
and Brethren,
or to fall
themselves by
their Hands.
He has excited
domestic
Insurrections
amongst us, and
has endeavoured

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

There is an uncomfortable irony to declaring independence on someone else's land, which is perhaps why the United States' founding document mentions Native Americans only once, when it condemns George III for inciting "merciless Indian Savages". But despite its near silence on the subject, white Americans were well aware that they were newcomers to the continent. Native peoples composed large populations on the margins of the fragile states that declared themselves "FREE AND INDEPENDENT" in 1776, played key roles in the strategic planning that won the Revolutionary War, and, after the ratification of the Constitution, regularly visited the republic's first president.

They were also aware that their nation's relationship to the continent's original inhabitants sat uneasily with Jefferson's declaration of universal human rights. By the 1830s, however, their reverence for the radical language of the Declaration of Independence gave way to unbridled acquisitiveness. In that decade, the United States deported most of the 100,000 native people who remained within its borders.

Today, national political discourse rarely engages with Native Americans, and there is little serious reflection about the fact that the United States is built on land that once belonged to other peoples. In reading the Declaration of Independence, it is vital to explore the contradiction between its republican rhetoric and its declaration of US sovereignty over native lands. The tension between self-determination and the nation-state, human rights and empire, has as much relevance today as it did when Thomas Jefferson drafted the document almost 250 years ago.



Claudio Saunt



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As someone who studies memory, one thing I've learned to look for is what's not mentioned — especially when people make arguments that they hope will have lasting influence. In rereading the Declaration of Independence, I was struck by the curious near-absence of the British Empire's most consequential political institution. Parliament is only mentioned twice, and even then, not explicitly. Why?

Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress wanted desperately to convince a “candid World” that they were justified in replacing their current political system. The only problem was that their new governments, at the state level, looked a lot like the British one, in that most featured a strong, two-house legislature, just like Parliament.

Maybe Jefferson and his colleagues decided to square that circle by pinning Britain's “History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations” entirely on George III, notwithstanding that a majority of the Declaration's listed grievances were rooted in Parliamentary policy or stemmed from Crown actions only possible with Parliamentary support. The Signers could therefore demonize George III, by whom they felt deeply betrayed, putting a face on the enemy. Just as consequently, they could elide what might have been their own ambivalence in trading a British legislature for American ones. And in doing so, the Declaration made the political personal, both at the time, focusing Americans' ire on George III rather than Parliament as the author of their imperial misery, and ever since, as we magnify our presidents and governors compared to the importance of our other branches of government.

Andrew Schocket

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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
the
Citizens
of
Emigration and

We, the people, make the past. That's evident from the Declaration of Independence, a first draft of American history that made readers into revolutionaries by arming them with an effective script to deliver. Targeting George III in what amounted to a class action lawsuit of imperial ills, the colonists reinforced eighteenth-century notions of law as a remedy. They upheld government as the true realization of civil rights. Yet this text is a far cry from dry legal jargon. The Declaration's lively and livid prose ricochets between royal misdeeds and American hopes, criminalizing Old World habits while advocating New World civics. It is a resounding referendum on empire's faults.

Thanks to John Dunlap's broadside, independence went "viral" as the text rippled through the colonies. Imagine the visceral heft of it tumbling out in churches and statehouses, homes and schools! When I show the Massachusetts Historical Society's Dunlap broadside — one of our great archival treasures — I linger over the verbs and focus on it as a set of big ideas in vivid action. Go ahead, try it. Feel how the verbs circle, punch, and jab at British opponents from an ocean away: "refused," "plundered," "imposing," "depriving," "forbidden." Then, contrast the more positive actions that Americans plan to take in making a new government: "hold," "secure," "support," and "mutually pledge." This way of reading the action-packed Declaration shows us how, as John Adams believed, the Revolution was long nurtured "in the Minds and Hearts of the People."



Sara Georgini

Series Editor, The Papers of John Adams
The Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society

The published version of the Declaration of Independence cut key phrases from an earlier draft prepared by Thomas Jefferson. After detailing British abuses, Jefferson had originally asserted, “these facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. we must endeavor to forget our former love for them”. Why were those lines struck?

By July of 1776, colonists had come to think of themselves not as colonists at all, but as American patriots ready to break with Britain. Calling the British unfeeling at that point would have amounted to pleading with them to prove that they still had feelings for their colonists. In earlier protests, colonists had used such tactics with some success. But they eventually lost patience with making emotional appeals. As an open “Letter to the Inhabitants of Great Britain” published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1774 complained:

“The more they supplicated, the more they were abused. By their tears...their persecutions flourished, as trees by water poured on their roots. Their very virtue and passionate fondness for ... their Mother country occasioned this objected error.”

By 1776, any lingering show of fondness for the mother country, any last emotional appeal, would have invited the British to repair the relationship – and sent entirely the wrong message. Colonists were ready to cut all political ties to Britain. The conciliatory signals sent by Jefferson’s original references to emotional connections no longer corresponded to the openly combative message colonists wanted to send.

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Annette Gordon-Reed

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Professor of History, Harvard University*

How to respond freshly to a document that you've read many times and thought about seriously for years? The first word that came to mind in my latest rereading of the Declaration of Independence was "Jeffersonian."

I am struck by how much the ideas and spirit of the document track the great strengths and weaknesses of its principal author, Thomas Jefferson. There has been a movement to deny Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration, as if copy editors are the true authors of the books and articles on which they work. The Declaration's broad, sweeping language that captured what was considered the most progressive thinking of the day, the optimism about human beings and about the future of a project — the United States of America — that seemed quixotic to many at the time, the lawyer-like presentation of the brief against the King of England, the implacable certainty that he (the cause) was right — these are Jefferson to a T.

He would, after all, go on to found the University of Virginia — certain beyond all available evidence (reason?) that an institution just down the road from Monticello, in then barely existent Charlottesville, would one day be among the great universities of the world. Jefferson was a dreamer. His University was a dream, as are the most famous parts of the Declaration — the parts that have inspired people the world over. A document that has had such profound public meaning is, in large measure, a template for the inner life of the man who wrote it.



in Peace, Friends. WE, therefore, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in GENERAL CONGRESS, Affsembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by 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 to 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.

