

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

THOMAS JEFFERSON
1776

TEXT

(2) 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.... 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.

(29) He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

(31) 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.

HISTORY

Representatives of the thirteen original U.S. colonies signed the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776, citing over 30 grievances that “impelled them to the separation.” The opening paragraphs proclaim America’s founding principle of equality, yet later paragraphs violate that principle. Paragraph 29 refers to Native Americans as “savages.” Paragraph 31 refers to British as “brethren in peace and enemies in war.”

In addition, Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration, is a complicated symbol of human freedom and dignity. While his ideas were literally revolutionary, his behavior was literally oppressive. Not only was he a slaveholder, he also forcibly fathered multiple children with an enslaved woman, Sally Hemmings (a half sister of his late wife). Even though these were the cultural norms of his day, his personal behavior makes the Declaration paradoxical for many Americans.

The Declaration asserts that human equality is derived from the laws of nature and nature’s God. “All men are created equal. . . and are endowed with ‘unalienable rights’ to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Governments derive their “just powers from the consent of the governed,” but when a government abuses its power, the people have a right and a duty to throw it off.

Perhaps the most famous and foundational American text, the Declaration of Independence is both inspiring and frustrating. The soaring rhetoric of “unalienable rights” and “all men are created equal” inspire, while Jefferson’s way of life seem hypocritical.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which idea in the Declaration of Independence is the most important to your identity as an American?
- What sacred texts and beliefs of your faith tradition relate to the Declaration’s essence?
- To what extent has America succeeded in upholding the vision of the Declaration?
- Given the contradictions between Paragraph 2 and Paragraphs 29 and 30, how can we maintain respect for the Declaration’s assertion that “all people are created equal?”
- Can a document be morally visionary even if its author was morally compromised?