



THE UNDERLYING IDEAS IN THE DECLARATION

Mortimer Adler

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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.

Introduction: Understanding the Declaration as a Whole

THE UNDERLYING IDEAS of the Declaration are to be found in its second long paragraph, beginning with the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” They are concerned with human equality, inalienable* rights, the pursuit of happiness, the consent of the governed, and the justification for overthrowing a government. We shall be concerned with understanding these ideas in the chapters to follow.

*The term “inalienable” is employed in narrative text for “unalienable” found in the original text.

However, there are some things in the Declaration’s initial and concluding paragraphs that deserve brief consideration before we give close attention to the five ideas just mentioned. Here are the words of the opening paragraph.

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.

The pivotal idea enunciated here is that of a people having a distinct political status. We observed in Chapter 1 that the people of the thirteen colonies, in rebelling against British rule, understood themselves as a new people, separate from their British brethren overseas.

The fighting in which they were already engaged was more than a war of rebellion against what they regarded as despotism on the part of the British King and Parliament. It was a war to be fought for their independent status as a separate people—that is, a war to dissolve the political bands that tied them to the people of Great Britain. They asked the nations of Europe to look upon them as a political entity entitled to a separate and equal station among the peoples of the earth.

It is this appeal in the Declaration’s opening paragraph that justified the celebration of the first bicentennial as the 200th anniversary of this nation’s coming into existence. But it must be clearly understood that, in the fullest and most precise understanding of what a national state is, the United States of America as a national state did not come into being in 1776. What came into existence

then was a separate people as a new political entity, and it was the harbinger of the new nation that would be born in 1789.

On what grounds did the colonists in 1776 claim to be one people even though they also belonged to thirteen quite distinct human groups, each with its own local loyalties? What constitutes the status of “peoplehood”? Just the fact that they spoke a common language, or the fact that most had emigrated from a common home and so shared common cultural and political traditions and a common body of laws?

Centuries earlier, Cicero, in his *De Republica*, had defined a people as “not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of them in large numbers associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good.” A multitude of persons forms a single people when they are united for a common purpose and are willing to cooperate in its pursuit. The establishment of a Continental Congress to which the thirteen colonies sent their representatives indicated that the separate populations of those colonies had become one people.

In the years immediately prior to 1776, committees of correspondence developed, first within each colony and then between colonies. From such committees, and from the colonial assemblies, there issued calls for a first and then a second Continental Congress. This amounted to an initial affirmation that the Americans had become one people.

The resort to arms in 1775 occurred with the approbation of an all-colony-wide Congress. The Resolutions of Independence, issued on July 2, 1776, came from such a Congress. The final confirmation came two days later in the Declaration of Independence. Its closing paragraph referred to the persons who signed their names to it as representatives of the thirteen colonies “in general Congress assembled.”

Now let us look at the final paragraph, certain words and phrases in which deserve close attention.

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.

The signers of the Declaration speak of themselves as representatives of “the United States of America,” but a few lines later they also say they are speaking in the name and by the authority of “the good people of these colonies” and then go on to say that “these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States.”

If these united colonies existed as free and independent states (in the plural), the words “the United States of America” could not have been understood by the signers of the Declaration to refer to a single polity.

This is confirmed by a passage a few lines further on. There we find it said that the thirteen colonies “as free and independent States . . . 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.” The powers enumerated are the very powers that any sovereign state claims its rights to exercise. Hence each of the thirteen colonies united in their struggle for independence regarded itself as a fully sovereign state.

It is precisely such sovereignty that was taken away from the thirteen independent states when they abandoned their loose confederacy and entered into a more perfect union by adopting the Constitution of the United States. According to that document, the power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and so on was taken away from the thirteen federated states and conferred solely upon the federal government—the government of the United States of America—which then came into being for the first time.

We now come to the part of the Declaration that is more than a declaration of independence on the part of the thirteen rebellious colonies. This part is a declaration of the political principles that underlie the Constitution of the United States.

To say that the Constitution, without all its amendments to come later, established a government that fully conformed to those underlying principles is to claim too much for it. Abraham Lincoln was at pains to remind us that the principles enunciated in the Declaration should be understood as a pledge to the future of ideals

that would not be fully realized in the first fifty or even first hundred years of the Republic's existence.

Another statement by Lincoln confirms this insight. In 1859, he said:

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of 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, and so to embalm it there that today and in all coming days it shall be a rebuke . . . to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny.

If we speak of the drafting of the Constitution—before its adoption or ratification—as the conception of the American republic and its government (a political community and political institutions yet to be born), then we can also talk about the political principles expressed in the Declaration as the germs generative of that conception.

With some slight excerpting, here is the second paragraph of the Declaration, containing all the words and phrases that we must now attempt to understand as clearly as possible.

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 shown, 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 prepare readers for the chapters that follow, in which the crucial ideas in the Declaration's second paragraph will each be treated at

length, it may be useful to put down an explication of that paragraph as a whole.

The explication I propose will spell out as explicitly as possible what is said much more tersely and often more elliptically in the paragraph as written by Thomas Jefferson. As written by him, the paragraph has rhetorical power that was achieved by its extraordinary brevity and by all the things that were left unsaid—left implicit rather than spelled out.

All that I claim for my much more explicit rendering is that, in a straightforward and prosaic manner, it tries to state at much greater length in a logically explicit manner what is skipped over or only hinted at in a statement that, for good rhetorical reasons, is much briefer. My rendering is, of course, only one man's interpretation, submitted for whatever light it throws on the text before us.

1. We hold certain propositions to be true, true everywhere and at all times, capable of winning the assent of all reasonable men.
2. Among these at least one is self-evident because its truth is undeniable, a truth that is perceived as soon as its terms are understood, for when they are understood the opposite of what that proposition states is unthinkable.
3. That one is the proposition, here rephrased, that all human beings are by nature equal. None is more or less human than any other. All share or participate in the same specific nature, in virtue of which all have the same specific properties, though one human being may have these human characteristics or attributes to a higher or lower degree than another, in which respects they may be unequal.
4. We hold it to be true but not self-evident that all men are endowed with certain inalienable rights, rights inherent in their human nature and, therefore, equally inherent in all by virtue of their all having that same nature.
5. The inalienability of such inherent natural—or human—rights consists in their being rights that are not conferred upon persons by man-made laws and so cannot be rendered null and void by man-made laws, though they can be abrogated or transgressed by governments, the injustice of which consists in the violation of these rights.
6. Among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These three rights by no means exhaust all natural or human rights, but all the others that have so far been acknowledged, or that in the

course of time remain to be discovered, implement these three principal rights.

7. Of these three principal rights, the primary one differs from the rest by being concerned with an end or objective for the attainment of which the others serve as means. That one is the right of each person to pursue happiness—that is, to try to make a good human life for himself or herself. The most precise way of stating this truth is to say that our natural rights consist in our rights to life, liberty, and anything else that we need in order to pursue happiness—goods that the government of an organized society can confer upon us, or can aid and abet our efforts to obtain.

8. Governments have not always been instituted to secure or safeguard our possession of these rights, but that is one of the purposes for which they should be instituted, and they are just only insofar as they carry out this aim.

9. Another criterion of the justice of governments is that they derive their powers from the consent of the governed; in other words, the authority by which they exercise their powers has its source in a constitution voluntarily adopted by a people who have the right to govern themselves.

10. Whenever a government ceases to operate within its constitutional limitations and becomes despotic or tyrannical by treating the people as its subjects or slaves, the people are justified in trying to alter it by rectifying such injustice or, in the last resort, by overthrowing it and establishing in its place a government so constituted that it serves the objectives at which a just government should aim.

11. This drastic remedy is justified not by light and transient causes, but only by a long train of abuses or usurpations that manifest a settled tendency toward despotic or tyrannical rule.

12. When that occurs, the people are not only justified in overthrowing such government, but they also have the duty, the moral obligation, to do so in order to fulfill their moral obligation to make good lives for themselves.

While the foregoing twelve statements are an extended explication of the principles of government enunciated in the rhetorically superior second paragraph of the Declaration, they are by no means lengthy or detailed enough to provide us with a fully explicit and completely clear understanding of those principles.

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