



THE AMERICAN TESTAMENT

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and
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Part 1 of 12

Preface

WE are grateful to the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies and to Joseph Slater and John Hunt, its President and Vice-President, for the auspices of the conference that was preparatory to the writing of this book. We wish to express our appreciation for the contributions made by the participants in that conference, held in Aspen, Colorado, on July 7-9, 1974.

The participants included Dumas Malone, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Virginia and the biographer of Jefferson; Edward H. Levi, then President of the University of Chicago and now Attorney General of the United States; James F. Hoge, Jr., Editor of the *Chicago Sun Times*; Seymour-Topping, Assistant Managing Editor of the *New York Times*; William Moyers of Station WNET, New York; Sidney Hyman, Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Illinois in Chicago; Douglass Cater, Director of the Aspen Institute Program on Communications and Society; Phillips Talbot, President of the Asia Society; C. A. Shillinglaw, Senior Vice-President of the Coca-Cola Company; Father Jerome B. Coll, S. J., of the Regis Educational Corporation; James F. Henry, President of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation; Mary Morrisett, New York City; Alvin I. Brown, President of the Aldon Construction Company of Washington, D.C.; Bethuel M. Webster of Webster Sheffield Fleischmann Hitchcock & Brookfield in New York City; and Elizabeth Paepcke, Trustee of the Aspen Institute.

Both in the preparation of the original draft of the materials that were submitted to the Aspen Conference and also in the preparation of the manuscript of this book, we received guidance and assistance from our colleagues at the Institute for Philosophical Research. We wish to acknowledge specifically the contributions made by Otto Bird, Charles Van Doren, and John Van Doren. We also wish to express our appreciation to Marlys Buswell of the Institute staff for her painstaking editorial work on the manuscript.

We have tried to keep footnotes to a minimum. Information about persons, places, and events connected with the documents is given in a glossary at the end of the book. We are grateful to Wayne Moquin for his assistance in preparing this glossary.

In the textual passages that we have quoted, we have here and there introduced italicization for emphasis.

MJA

WG

Editor's Note on Digital Edition

As noted in the preface footnotes have been kept to a minimum. Since this edition may be used in many different eReaders and footnotes do not normally display at the bottom of a page, the footnotes will immediately follow their reference number in the text and will be contained in curly brackets, i.e.¹ {Footnote 1}

Introduction

LOOKING toward the bicentennial anniversary of the United States of America, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies held a three-day conference in July 1974 to consider the significance of three historic statements of the American idea—the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address.

Collaborating with the Aspen Institute on this occasion, the Institute for Philosophical Research proposed that the three documents be regarded as the “American Testament,” and it prepared commentaries on them to guide the discussion in Aspen. The authors of this book, Mortimer Adler and William Gorman, served as moderators of the conference. At the conclusion of the conference, the participants recommended that the commentaries on the documents constituting the American Testament be revised in the light of the discussion and prepared for publication. Mr. Gorman, who prepared the original draft of the commentaries, revised and expanded that draft, which went through further expansions and revisions to become this book.

The proposal that the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address be regarded as the American Testament arose from the following considerations. To an astonishing and unprecedented degree, the United States was born out of sustained argument and grave political deliberation which committed this nation to a coherent political doctrine. That doctrine is set forth with an inspired brevity in a few momentous state papers—the first occurring at the moment of this country's resolution for independence, the second at the moment of the new government's formation, and the third at the moment of the major crisis in our national history. Direct and concentrated inquiry into the truth of that doctrine should be a steady part of the American experience, and the basic propositions

in it should be the object of sustained, disciplined public discussion, not only during the bicentennial celebration, but at all times.

To regard the three documents chosen for this purpose as constituting a *testament* attributes to them a character that calls for a special mode of interpretation—the kind of interpretation that the faithful give to scriptures they look upon as sacred. The assumption underlying the way in which Muslims read the Koran, Jews the Old Testament, and Christians the New Testament is that the text they are reading contains truths which they should make the most strenuous effort to discover by patient and careful exegesis. Such a reading is called “exegetical” because it tries “to lead out of” the text the truth assumed to be in it.

To approach the three documents that constitute the American Testament in this way does not require us to regard them as sacred scriptures or as revealed truth, nor indeed as the basis for any sort of “civil religion.” There is a long tradition of commentary on secular writings in which the approach to the text being interpreted is analogous to the approach of the faithful to sacred texts. Medieval commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle—by Arabic, Jewish, and Christian teachers—can be cited as examples of this method of reading a text for the purpose of discovering the truth it is supposed to contain. Modern examples are to be found in the extensive commentaries on the writings of Immanuel Kant or Karl Marx.

With some variation in style, what is common to all these examples of exegetical reading, whether of secular texts or of texts regarded as sacred, is a method of interpretation that concentrates on the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, and on the relation between one element in the discourse and another, while paying little or no attention to contextual considerations or to psychological and sociological factors that may or may not have been responsible for the genesis of the texts being interpreted. An exegetical reading is concerned with philological aspects of the text, with the biography of its author, or with the historical circumstances under which it appeared *only* to the extent that these considerations contribute to an understanding of the text, not as affecting judgments about the truth of what is being said.

In sharp contrast to the exegetical method of reading a text is another method of commentary, which was called “the higher criticism” when, in the nineteenth century, it was first applied to the Old and the New Testaments. This method of interpretation is widely prevalent today, especially in the reading of political documents such as the ones chosen to be components of the American Testament. It makes little or no effort to get at the truth that the text being commented on may contain; it may almost be said to

have no concern with the truth or falsity of what is being said *in* the document under consideration. Instead, the truth with which it is concerned is the truth *about* the document in question. To this end, it concentrates on the historical circumstances, the sociological influences, and the psychological motivations that are thought to have determined its content.

These two methods of interpreting and commenting on the written word are thus seen to differ radically with respect to the truth with which they are concerned—the one with the truth *in* the document, the other with the truth *about* the document. This book offers its readers one approach to the three documents that are the subject of its three commentaries—the approach that has been called an exegetical reading of them. This by no means precludes the other approach, but it does require the reader to accept, even if only provisionally, the assumption underlying the approach made here; namely, that the three documents under consideration contain basic truths to be ferreted out by the most careful explication of the meaning implicit in the words of the text. On this assumption, the effort of the commentator—and of the reader as well—should be to arrive at as clear and explicit a statement of these truths as can be found.

The interpretations by the exegetical method that this book advances can be challenged in at least two ways. One way is to question the accuracy or soundness of the interpretation being advanced; to be effective, such a challenge should be accompanied by the use of the same method to produce another, somewhat divergent interpretation. A second way, which would accept the interpretations here offered as correct, is to question the validity of the propositions that the commentary claims to be the basic truths contained in the documents. Here it is not the meaning of the document that is in question, but rather the truth of what the document is interpreted as meaning.

This book will fail in its purpose to arouse a sustained, critical discussion of the American idea if its readers do not challenge it in one or another of these ways; but, in doing so, the readers must also discharge the intellectual obligations attached to the questions they raise—to provide an alternative exegesis, in the one case, and to provide a refutation based on relevant and cogent reasons, in the other.

It was said above that the exegetical approach to an important text or document does not preclude the quite opposite approach that is concerned with the truth *about* the document rather than with the truth *in* it. The reverse must also be said, because it may be mistakenly thought that what can be found out about a document's historical origins, about its surrounding circumstances, or about the motivations of its writer or writers

precludes an attempt to find out the meaning inherent in the statements it makes and to say whether or not what they mean is true. That is certainly not the case; nor is it even correct to think that the interpretation arrived at by an exegetical reading should be affected, colored, or slanted in any essential way by whatever facts can be discovered about the document's historical background, circumstantial setting, or psychological genesis.

There is one other misapprehension to which attention should be called in order to ensure its avoidance. To claim that this or any other exegetical reading of the three documents comprised by the American Testament has discovered a political doctrine that is not only significant and coherent but also true does not involve making the further claim that Americans over the last two centuries have lived up to the truth of the doctrine to which they have, from time to time, given verbal expressions of loyalty. They may do precisely that—yet only that—even more vociferously during this bicentennial period.

This book does not dwell on the discrepancies between the truths it holds up for scrutiny and the actual practice of the citizens of this country or the performance of its government. Just mention of the fact should suffice to call to mind how often the actions of Americans and of their government, both past and present, have departed from or traversed those truths.

Nor does this book give more than passing notice to the fact that the truths to which it tries to call attention are not universally acknowledged, either in America or in the world. In this connection, special mention should be made of the truth about the specific nature of man, on which human equality rests, and the truth about the natural rights of man, equally inherent in all men, which provide the indispensable criteria of political, economic, and social justice, as well as the basis for claiming that democracy is the only perfectly just form of government.

The Declaration of Independence

Text

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

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 a 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 con strains 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 meantime, exposed to all the danger of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose, obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migration 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 time 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 benefit of trial by jury:

For transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offenses:

For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring 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 complete 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 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.

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 attention 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 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 the 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.



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