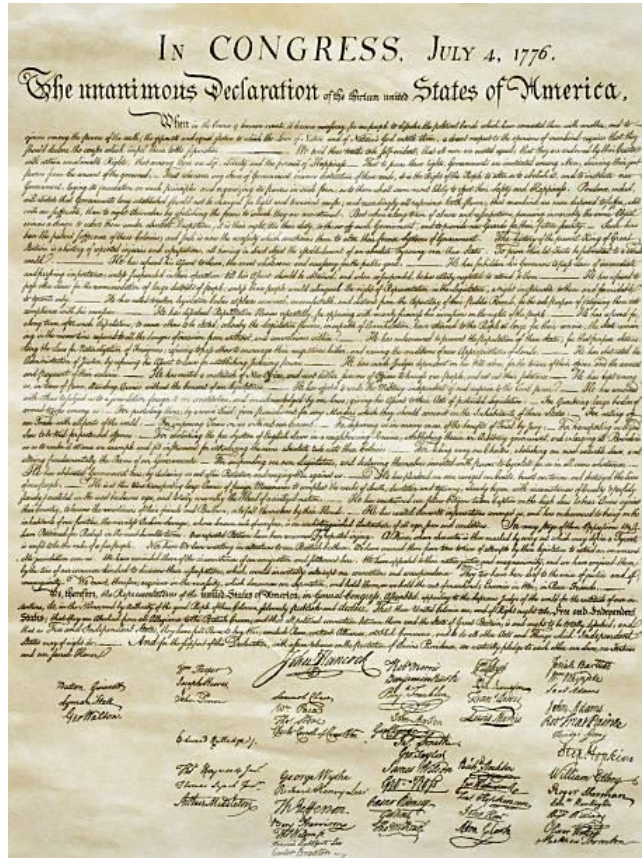


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

July 2019

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

№ 999



Archivist's Note

In the 1980's Dr. Adler was instrumental in the formation of the National Paideia Center at the University of North Carolina. Dr. Adler conducted a series of seminars with high school students and these seminars were videotaped.

The purpose of these videos is to teach anyone how to conduct Socratic seminars. In these programs, Dr. Adler conducts seminars with high school students on the readings below. After each discussion there is a question and answer session between Dr. Adler the student's teachers.

Five DVDs plus a 187 page Teacher's Program Guide (pdf), several earlier guides by Dr. Adler on conducting Great Book discussions, and the transcript of a discussion conducted by

Dr Adler and Dr. Hutchins are available for purchase on The Center website. <http://www.thegreatideas.org/Store.html>

- 1) THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE - (60 min.)
- 2) APOLOGY - Plato - (60 min.)
- 3) ANTIGONE - Sophocles - (60 min.)
- 4) THE PRINCE - Machiavelli - (90 min.)
- 5) Aristotle's POLITICS & Rousseau's THE SOCIAL CONTRACT- (60 min.)

In 1984 Dr. Adler played the video of the Declaration of Independence seminar for a group at the University of North Carolina. Today's TGIO has Dr. Adler's introductory remarks before showing the video.

Ken Dzigan
Senior Fellow and Archivist
July, 2019

Mortimer Adler
University of North Carolina
February 1984

Introductory Remarks on a Discussion of the Declaration of Independence

We are going to discuss the Declaration of Independence, a document that every American citizen should try to understand, and one that, like other great writings, should be read carefully and thoroughly in every school in this country.

We will not be able to cover the whole Declaration of Independence, though it is only three pages long. Its content is so rich that we cannot discuss it thoroughly in two hours. We will spend a few moments on the opening and on the closing paragraphs, and then devote all the rest of the time to the first five lines of the second paragraph, beginning with the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."

In those five lines almost every word counts. That is why we shall pay very close attention to all the important words. Those words express the fundamental ideas in American political life—that all human beings are equal; that all have certain natural, human; and therefore unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that a just government should secure these rights for all the people; and that, to be just, it should also be government that is established by and carried on with the consent of the governed.

It will take the better part of two hours to achieve a clear understanding of these ideas. To do so requires all of us to use words with maximum precision. That is difficult to do and most people, including most students, are not accustomed to doing it.

In the questions I ask the students, I will try to be as precise as possible in my use of words; and I will try to get them to be precise in their use of words in answering me—so that we can achieve a clear understanding of the ideas expressed.

This kind of exercise, as carried on in French schools, is called *explication de texte*. It is a very instructive exercise and the Declaration of Independence is an ideal text to perform that exercise on.

In the course of the discussion, difficult questions will confront us—questions to which none of us will know the answer. That is good, for such questions keep our minds actively engaged in the pursuit of answers.

The seminar will run for two hours, but you will be seeing only excerpts from it. Please remember that you will be seeing excerpts, not the whole.

Following the seminar, you will witness and hear a discussion that I will be having with high school teachers. They will be asking me questions about the conduct of the seminar and about the educational purpose and value of such discussions. Again, you will have only excerpts from this discussion, not the whole of it.

However, I hope that this little bit will still be enough to give you some understanding and appreciation of this kind of teaching and learning, one that should be in all our schools from grade one through grade twelve.

In the programs to follow this one, we will discuss other selections from the great books—from Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Machiavelli, and Sophocles

I mention this in order to say that you will see in the programs to come other examples of this kind of teaching and learning. As the books read by the students and discussed in the seminar differ from one another, so also does the way in which they must be discussed.

Our discussion of the Declaration of Independence will give you just one example of the method—in this case a close analytical examination of a very rich and difficult text.



THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501) (c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.