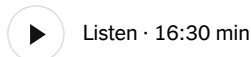


OPINION
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Five Words That Changed America

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There is a moment for every American when she first encounters the Declaration of Independence. For most, it comes to her as scripture — the highest and most sacred text in the nation’s civic religion, encapsulated by its moving assertion of human equality: “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.”

This Declaration is a profound statement of values: of a universal aspiration for human freedom. As President Gerald Ford said in a speech marking the nation’s bicentennial, “The Declaration is the Polaris of our political order — the fixed star of freedom. It is impervious to change because it states moral truths that are eternal.”

As a matter of civic faith, this is what the Declaration means. As a matter of history, however, the story is much more complicated.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote it, the Declaration was less an affirmation of human equality than a pointed claim about the nature of political authority and a powerful assertion of the right of revolution, informed by the Enlightenment writings of John Locke and other social contract theorists. It was meant as an argument about the preconditions of government — an assertion of the purity of prelapsarian life — not a road map for emancipation.

“The opening assertions of ‘self-evident’ truths concern men in a ‘state of nature’ before government was established,” the historian Pauline Maier observed in “American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence.” “With regard to persons, equality meant simply that no one held authority over others by right of birth or as a gift of God.”

In other words, Jefferson was channeling a common sentiment in Revolutionary-era America, “a political orthodoxy whose basic principles colonists could pick up from sermons or newspapers or even schoolbooks without ever reading a systematic work of political theory,” Maier wrote. Just look to Thomas Paine, who wrote in “Common Sense” — published about six months before the signing of the Declaration — that “all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever.”

Jefferson’s equality was a thought experiment. It did not extend to political society, nor was it

meant for those placed beyond the political community. Men could be created equal and still be different; men could be created equal and still be subordinate.

This, for many of the Patriot leaders, was a given.

But then there were those outside the circle of belonging: women, Natives, landless laborers and, most starkly, Black Americans, both free and enslaved. They did not read — or, most likely, hear — the Declaration as an abstract claim about a prelapsarian past. They understood it as a radical statement of principle *for the present*. And they wielded this principle against a society that would not extend the Revolutionary promise of freedom and self-government to those held in bondage.

It was their Declaration — the one that they made for themselves — that stood for a universal claim of human equality in the here and now. And it was their Declaration that would come to supplant Jefferson's historical and metaphysical one as the linchpin of America's civic ideal, passing from Black Americans to abolitionists to the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln, who consecrated their Declaration at Gettysburg as the spiritual foundation for a “new birth of freedom” and a “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” established “four score and seven years ago” in 1776.

It is this Declaration that is under assault from a political movement that rejects the credal vision of the American Republic in favor of an exclusionary racial nationalism, that defines American citizenship by blood and heritage, that sneers at the “five words about equality” in the Declaration and that worships at the altar of hierarchy and caste. But it is also this Declaration that still inspires Americans to fight for their place in this country and demand their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is hard to exaggerate the alacrity with which Black Americans seized on the rhetoric of the Revolution to demand a free and equal place in the new and nascent American Republic.

“We would therefore humbly pray, that whilst you are consulting, asserting and maintaining your own natural rights against the arbitrary designs of those who would subject you to slavery, that you would think on our unhappy case, who have been long groaning under the insupportable burden,” Bristol Lambee, an enslaved man bound in Connecticut, wrote to the “Sons of Liberty in Connecticut” on behalf of “a number of poor Africans.”

We do not know much about Lambee, but his petition — which was issued in October 1774 — is written in the idiom of the Revolution, using the same terms that Jefferson would deploy just two years later. “Your petitioners apprehend that *liberty*, being founded upon the law of *nature*, is as necessary to the happiness of an African as it is to the happiness of an Englishman,” Lambee wrote, “and that we, notwithstanding our present state of slavery, have, in common with other men, a natural right to be free, and without molestation to enjoy such property as we by our honest industry may acquire.”

Black Americans could speak the language of the Patriots as fluently as any member of the Continental Congress. And as the war intensified, so too did their petitions and demands, which began to make direct reference to the Declaration of Independence.

“Your petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other men, a natural and

unalienable right to that freedom, which the great parent of the universe hath bestowed equally on all mankind, and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatsoever, but they were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of power, from their dearest friends, and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender parents,” reads the 1777 petition of “a great number of Negroes who are detained in a state of slavery.” It is signed by Prince Hall — a leading member of Boston’s Black community — Lancaster Hill, Peter Bess and Brister Slenser, among others not listed.

“They cannot but express their astonishment,” the petitioners continue, “that it has never been considered, that every principle from which America has acted in the course of all her unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your petitioners.”

The use of the language of the Declaration and of the Revolution was not merely rhetorical: The point of these petitions was to push legislators to treat the opening words of their Constitutions and laws as more than preambulatory; to treat them as pregnant with real meaning and live consequence.

A 1779 petition to the New Hampshire legislature from Nero Brewster, an enslaved man in his late 60s, and 19 others announces that “freedom is an inherent right of the human species” and beseeches the legislature to “graciously interpose in our behalf, and enact such laws and regulations, as in your wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our liberty, and be ranked in the class of free agents, and that the name of slave may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom.”

To read the words of Black Americans, free and enslaved, is to see the Declaration in motion — to see it as a living document with meaning far beyond the circumstances of American independence. And it is to see the fact that this meaning was *made*: constructed by people with an intimate, fundamental sense of what freedom meant and what it required.

As a form, the petition called on its authors to show some humility. Other formats allowed for more pointed, even fiery rhetoric, blasting Patriot leaders for their hypocrisy.

“Attend to your own declarations,” reads a 1783 editorial in The Maryland Gazette by the anonymous “Vox Africanorum.” “These truths are self-evident — all men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ We shall offer no arguments — nay, it would be insulting to the understanding of America at this enlightened period to suppose she stood in need of arguments to prove our right to liberty. It would be to suppose,” Vox continued, that “she has already forgot those exalted principles she has so lately asserted with her blood.”

Perhaps the most famous example of a founding-era Black American wielding the words of the Declaration as a promise to be fulfilled comes from Benjamin Banneker, the naturalist and mathematician, who quoted Jefferson’s words back to him in a 1791 letter confronting the secretary of state on his hypocrisy:

“You publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages,” he wrote. “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,

and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’”

Having hailed the Declaration as an eternal truth, Banneker then holds it up in negative contrast to its author. “How pitiable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the father of mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves.”

Jefferson, then serving under George Washington, had never understood himself as making a statement about political and social equality. But Black Americans absolutely did. And as we see, they did not hesitate to pressure the former American revolutionaries with their own words and commitments.

Many of them felt the contradiction in ways that put lie to the modern idea that such “men of their time” were innocent of moral fault, or that it is a distortion or corruption of history to tell the truth about their hypocrisy. And in the present, you should see the assault on Black history and Black studies by conservative reactionaries as an attempt to obscure the fact that the Black Americans of the early Republic were “men of their time” as well.

One consequence of this pressure was that, by the first decade of the 19th century, most Northern states had either abolished slavery or put it on the path to extinction. Even in the South, there was a burst of energy related to manumission: Virginia amended its laws in 1782 to make it easier for owners to free their slaves, and several men — including John Payne Jr., Dolley Madison’s father — did just that.

This emancipatory energy was short-lived. Technological developments like the cotton gin and the burgeoning Industrial Revolution in England would make enslaved Africans newly valuable, a lucrative asset that drove the production of vital commodities.

It was during this time that the Declaration faded from mainstream view as an object of veneration, to be supplanted by the Constitution in American political discourse. Except, that is, among Black Americans and their allies, who continued to wield it as a binding promise of freedom and equality against slavery, slaveholders and the government that served their interests.

George Bourne, an English-born Presbyterian minister in Virginia, published “The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable” in 1816, where he condemned politicians who held “declarations of independence” in one hand and the lash in the other.

In his inaugural 1831 issue of *The Liberator*, his antislavery newspaper, William Lloyd Garrison quoted the Declaration extensively in his appeal on behalf of the enslaved. “While our Declaration of Independence boldly proclaims as self-evident truths ‘that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ — at the very seat of government human beings are born, almost daily, whom the laws pronounce to be from their birth, not *equal* to other men, and who are, for life, deprived of *liberty* and the free *pursuit of happiness*.”

Garrison, it should be said, hated the Constitution and condemned it as a “covenant with death” and “an agreement with hell” because of the ways it empowered and strengthened the grip of the slave-owning South on the national government. But the Declaration was a torch that lit the path to salvation.

The South Carolina abolitionist Angelina Grimké declared slavery “contrary to the declaration of our independence” in her 1836 “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” and in a stark condemnation of American hypocrisy, the Colored Anti-Slavery Society of Newark proclaimed in 1834 that “it is our opinion, that if all the blood of our colored brethren shed by the people of the United States since the Declaration of Independence was kept in a reservoir, the framers of that instrument and their successors might swim in it.”

Frederick Douglass made what was the most famous condemnation of the United States in his 1852 speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Throughout, he wields both the language and the ideals of the Declaration like a scalpel. “Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting,” Douglass said to the hundreds of people packed in the Corinthian Hall in Rochester, N.Y., to hear him speak. “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”

It was in the hands of abolitionists, Black and white, carried over from Black Americans free, freed and enslaved, that the Declaration worked as both an indictment and a promise — the spiritual foundation of the nation and the standard that its institutions must meet. And it is this vision of the Declaration that Abraham Lincoln hailed as he ascended to political leadership in the 1850s, fending off Southern slaveholders and their apologists.

Provoked by men such as Senators John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and Stephen Douglas of Illinois back into political combat at the start of the decade, by the eve of his election as president, Lincoln was hailing the Declaration’s claim of equality as “a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.” It was an axiomatic truth, he contended in 1859, written into a “merely revolutionary document” that was “applicable to all men and all times.”

And it is in the first line of his Gettysburg Address — “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” — that Lincoln enshrines this understanding, shaped by the demands of enslaved people decades before his birth, into America’s national identity.

It is this vision of the Declaration that was written into the Constitution as the 14th Amendment, whose most consequential section guarantees the equal citizenship of all people born in the United States, a promise the Supreme Court just affirmed against the president’s attempt to end birthright citizenship by executive fiat.

“Let it be borne in mind that this is the government of men representing every people and kindred and tongue under the whole heavens,” said Representative John Bingham of Ohio, a key architect of the amendment, in an 1869 speech defending his work about a year after its ratification, “and that in the inception of our national struggle for representative government, in

1776, the declaration of the people was not that all *white* men are created equal, but that all *men* are created equal, and endowed by their creator with the rights of life and liberty.”

As we mark, this year, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it is important to see that its meaning is dynamic. And that meaning, as we understand it, flows less from the men who signed it than from those who heard its words and took ownership of them as a standard for their freedom and independence — not from Britain, but from bondage.

It is this Declaration — the slaves’ Declaration, the abolitionists’ Declaration, Lincoln’s Declaration — that is the beating heart of the American project. It is this Declaration that still lives as a promise to the people who call this nation home, as a challenge to those people to live up to their ideals and aspirations, and as a bulwark against those among them who would sacrifice their freedom for the false comfort of tyranny.

It is this Declaration that shows us the way we might be truly exceptional.

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