

The Timeless Principles of the Declaration of Independence

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The Continental Congress voted on July 2, 1776 to declare independence from Great Britain and approved the final wording of the Declaration on July 4. John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail during the period leading up to declaring independence: “Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphletts, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the 13, have now adopted it, as their own Act.” This involvement of “the whole People” was not a new practice, but one that had been cultivated for generations.

Declaring independence was done in the name of the people:

*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 (emphasis added).*

Invoking the people in the first line of the Declaration was not simply a rhetorical flourish or a dramatic overture; the former British subjects, now American citizens, were actively involved in severing ties and forming a new nation.

Calvin Coolidge, in his speech on the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, stated that the act of declaring independence “represented the movement of a people.” He explained further:

It was not, of course, a movement from the top. Revolutions do not come from that direction. It was not without the support of many of the most respectable people in the Colonies, who were entitled to all the consideration that is given to breeding, education, and possessions The American Revolution represented the informed and mature convictions of a great mass of independent, liberty-loving, God-fearing people who knew their rights, and possessed the courage to dare to maintain them.

The people Adams and Coolidge described did not rise up spontaneously. The recognition of duties, liberty, and rights began in the century prior to independence. It was simultaneously a civic, cultural, and political formation that continues to this day and consciously must be perpetuated.

Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*, discovered the principle and the life of American freedom in the township and recognized that it fostered self-governance. It nurtured the growth of freedom because of what it permitted and required and because of its limited scope. “Interests, passions, duties, and rights came to be grouped around the township’s individuality and strongly attached to it. In the heart of the township one sees a real, active altogether democratic and republican political life reigning.” Though initially confined to the emigrants in New England Tocqueville observed, the two or three principal ideas that formed the bases of the social theory of the United States and were combined in New England “*penetrated* the entire confederation.”

The freedom that was cultivated among the New Englanders thus became a part of the habits of the nation. This point cannot be given too much emphasis. In his chapter on the principal causes of maintaining the democratic republic in the United States, Tocqueville points to mores, which he understands as the habits, opinions, usages, and beliefs of the people, as regulating and directing the democracy of the United States. These mores, Tocqueville explains, are habits of the heart and of the mind; they comprehend the moral and intellectual state of a people. The experience of the township instilled in the immigrants and their descendants the love of freedom and the habit of governing that Tocqueville saw as crucial to sustaining democratic institutions. What Tocqueville observed was consistent with Adams’s description of the people’s involvement in declaring independence.

The assertion in the Declaration that *governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed* again recognizes the active participation of the people. The practice of consent began as early as 1610 with the Mayflower Compact that united the first settlers of the Plymouth colony. In his 1821 speech commemorating the Declaration of Independence, John Quincy Adams described the compact as “a social compact formed upon the elementary principles of civil society, in which conquest and servitude had no part. The slough of brutal force was entirely cast off; all was voluntary; all was unbiased consent; all was the agreement of soul with soul.” The shared root of the words consent and consensus is from the Latin *consentire*, to be in agreement, in harmony.

The Plymouth settlers drafted a compact that bound them into a body politic for better ordering and preservation, to enact and frame just and equal laws, acts, and constitutions for the general good of the colony. These same settlers were also British colonists. It is their descendants who severed ties with the British for not recognizing their inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The colonists exercised their legitimate right in 1776 to separate and withdrew consent from being governed further by the British.

The events leading up to independence began when the British levied taxes on the colonists with the passage of Sugar Act in 1764 and the Stamp Act in 1765. Individual colonies protested by sending letters and petitions to the British Parliament, but James Otis of Massachusetts, who had been advancing arguments invoking the natural rights of the colonists, suggested an intercolonial conference. Representatives from several colonies met as a body to formulate a response in the form of a Declaration of Rights and Grievances. The colonists in their private capacity also published letters and pamphlets arguing against the taxes.

While boycotts had greater impact toward ending British taxation, this initial intercolonial meeting was significant because it was a first attempt at providing a coordinated response to the British through a representative body. Following on this, the First and Second Continental Congresses met in Philadelphia in September 1774 and in May 1775, respectively, to address British actions that the colonists deemed hostile or contrary to their interests. Committees of Correspondence between the colonial governing bodies also served to develop ongoing intercolonial communication, which informed both private citizens and legislators.

We can begin to discern a pattern that has been woven into the fabric of America from these three examples: the local governments observed by Tocqueville as cultivating self-governance, private individuals adhering to a compact of their own design, and cooperative intercolonial bodies articulating rights and seeking redress for grievances. The tradition of convening groups of people, citizens, to seek common ground or resolve disputes, appointing representatives to governing bodies to meet on behalf of the people, and formulating a united response after debate, is a long standing tradition in America that preceded the formation of the states and the nation and was instrumental in declaring independence successfully from the British.

The citizenry was not only habituated to these practices, their representatives were as well. Coolidge made the following observation as it specifically related to declaring independence:

This obedience of the delegates to the wishes of their constituents, which in some cases caused them to modify their previous positions, is a matter of great significance. It reveals an orderly process of government in the first place; but more than that, it demonstrates that the Declaration of Independence was the result of the seasoned and deliberate thought of the dominant portion of the people of the Colonies. Adopted after long discussion and as the result of the duly authorized expression of the preponderance of public opinion . . . It was in no sense a radical movement . . . It was conservative and represented the action of the colonists to maintain their constitutional rights which from time immemorial had been guaranteed to them under the law of the land.

The orderly process mentioned by Coolidge is one that has become a hallmark in America, but it goes beyond the elected representatives carrying out the wishes of the electorate. Two organizations that spawned significant movements in the United States modeled their Declarations after the Declaration of Independence: the American Anti-Slavery Convention in 1833 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the Woman's Rights Convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York.

Both acknowledged the rights in the 1776 Declaration, but the Anti-Slavery advocates sought to complete the recognition of those rights for all and the Woman's Rights advocates sought to expand them. Their efforts to accomplish their goals overlapped and included sending forth agents, circulating tracts, enlisting the pulpit and the press, purifying churches from the practice of participation in slavery, encouraging the labor of freemen, petitioning state and national legislatures, and organizing Anti-Slavery Societies and holding Women's Rights Conventions throughout the country. Their efforts to disseminate their arguments and persuade the citizenry and their elected representatives is consistent with the practice that was followed by the colonists and subsequently citizens of the newly formed United States upon declaring independence.

Among the finest examples in the twentieth century of shaping and influencing debate through an orderly process consistent with that which started with the colonists was Martin Luther King's non-violent protests. In his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King explained the steps he took to achieve full recognition of those rights articulated in the Declaration of Independence. He was in Birmingham because it was the most segregated city in the United States. It had, in King's words, an ugly record of brutality; there was no justice to be had in the courts, and the city fathers refused to engage in good-faith negotiation. Requests to the Birmingham economic community to "remove the stores' humiliating racial signs" also failed. Like the colonists some two centuries previously whose efforts at negotiation with the British failed, King's efforts also failed. He saw himself standing between the forces of complacency and those who called for violence. It became clear to him that other methods had to be tried; he decided on a course of direct action.

King wrote, "We would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?' 'Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?'" King prepared the protesters, in an orderly manner, for a non-violent protest with a specific aim: "The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." This is one example of the colonists' experiences differing from King's efforts: in spite of repeated efforts, the British refused to negotiate; King fared better, though not before grave trials and sufferings.

While many were critical of King's efforts, he responded:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

Similar to the efforts of the colonists who declared independence and proclaimed that they were *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*, King used various means to achieve an equal station for those living in Birmingham and all other places that continued to suffer the gross injustices that festered in those places that previously denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Anti-Slavery Society and the Women's Rights Convention acted in a similar fashion to King and the colonists; they raised the tension by bringing to the forefront matters that needed debate. There were disagreements, but the goal was to seek a remedy and resolve the tension. The practices that date back to the colonists of acting in concert to right wrongs, to do so without

violence, and to advance reasoned discourse in order to persuade have been used repeatedly throughout the nation's history.

Returning to Tocqueville's discussion of township, he warned that freedom can only be sustained when the institution has been among the people and its existence is part of their habits and customs. "In order to defend themselves successfully they must have completed all their developments and have been mixed with national ideas and habits." We should remind ourselves of these practices, in private capacities and public, and embrace them anew to resolve our contentious debates.

Editor's note: This essay is based upon a speech delivered at the St. John's College Graduate Institute, Santa Fe, New Mexico, July 4, 2018, "Does the Declaration of Independence Still Speak to Us Today?"