

‘BETWEEN PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT’

On memory, history, and the evolving meaning of America’s revolutionary founding document, the Declaration of Independence

By Brian Steele

When did the United States become independent? Today, every American schoolkid knows the answer. But when the Second Continental Congress voted on July 2, 1776, to approve Richard Henry Lee’s resolution that the united colonies “are and of right ought to be free and independent states,” no one did.

As the reply of the British government to the American Declaration smartly suggested: “It is easy to *declare* independence but quite another to *accomplish* independence.”

Americans, in other words, would have to fight to earn international recognition of their assertions. We celebrate 1776 as the birth year of our country, but we are able to do so only because the patriots won the war and forged a negotiated peace in 1783. And, so, the United States lived into itself; became, over time, what it had claimed itself, years earlier, to be.

History often works like this: What we do *now* shapes the meaning and significance of the past. If Americans had *not* won the war, the Declaration of Independence would be an interesting artefact of a failed colonial rebellion; full of inspiring ideas, to be sure, but likely read by only a handful of specialists on the British Empire (who might impose it on their students).

As it turns out, American victory in the Revolution also elevated the significance of the Declaration beyond its immediate purpose and extended its life in our democratic culture well beyond anything its original drafters could have envisioned.

Why we hold these truths

Most Americans can recognize, if not quote, some of the Declaration’s most elegant phrases. The powerful section in paragraph two has become, in essence, our national creed: *We hold these truths to be self-evident...*

Historians — professionally obsessed with context and verisimilitude — have argued (compellingly) that the second paragraph was essentially irrelevant to the achievement of independence, which turned on recognition of its legitimacy by other states. This is why the Declaration appealed to the “opinions of mankind” and submitted “facts” — the list of grievances that might justify their revolt — to a “candid world.” Abraham Lincoln himself conceded in 1857 that the assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain.

The United States, in other words, could have gained independence without the bit about human equality and pursuits of happiness. So, what’s it doing there?

Augustine wrote in *City of God* that a people is constituted by “loved things held in common.” In other words, if you want to understand a people, pay attention to what it loves. The Declaration assumes that there is such a thing as an American “we” and tells us a story about what that people loves and most deeply values.

Thomas Jefferson told James Madison in 1823 that when he wrote the Declaration he was not saying anything original: he was “merely the passive auditor of the opinions of” ordinary Americans, and he wrote what he assumed would always “command” their “assent,” such that their experience of reading it would not be surprise or revelation but recognition and affirmation.

So the Declaration is, in this sense, designed to tell Americans — and the world — who they are and what distinguishes them from other peoples. But it’s different from traditional stories of peoplehood because it does not speak of bloodlines, ethnicity, or religious adherence — the sorts of things around which most other nationalisms coalesce.

As President Jefferson put it in 1801: It would be by our common devotion to the “principles of ’76,” that Americans — “we” — would “learn to rally & to recognize one another.” Jefferson, in other words, merged the civic components of national identity — rational and volitional adherence to law and rights — with the historical and emotionally resonant story of a peoplehood that could perpetuate itself into the indefinite future.

Lincoln, who spent much of his political career encouraging Americans to realign themselves with this story, told a Chicago audience in 1858 that when we celebrate the Fourth, we look back and remember the founders, how they “fought for the principle that they

were contending for” and we are grateful for what they did since our own “prosperity” is bound up with it. We remember that “we are historically connected with it” and celebrating it makes us “feel more attached the one to the other and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit.”



Abraham Lincoln, June 3, 1860. Courtesy Library of Congress.

But Lincoln pointed out that many Americans were immigrants, not “descended by blood from our ancestors.” They cannot trace a connection to the founding if they look for it in history or bloodlines. *But*, Lincoln said:

when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident,’ and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.

The Declaration, Lincoln said, was the “electric cord” that unifies Americans who can trace their ancestry back to the Revolution with those naturalized citizens (and their descendants) who cannot. It is this “electric

cord” of the Declaration, not blood or ethnic descent or religious adherence, he contends, that “links” together “the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men,” who become the American people.

The gulf between promise and fulfillment

American history challenges this story, of course, sometimes exposing it as, if not quite a lie, hypocritical window-dressing. When we study history, we find that we’ve failed as often as we’ve fulfilled the claims Jefferson made about us. Jefferson himself certainly did so. But he also trusted that “our children” (that’s us) “will be as wise as we are and will establish in the fullness of time those things not yet ripe for establishment.”

And so our history is also, as he expected it would be, a history of cracking open the Declaration for truths not anticipated by the founders, as if the real meaning of the Declaration and American peoplehood will not be fully known until the future. If the sections relevant to independence appealed to world opinion, the creedal section’s audience is always *us*.

This is why the Declaration is rarely an occasion for uncritical celebration and self-congratulation; it has instead always been the standard that finds us wanting when our practices and institutions betray its claims about who we are and what we love. As Frederick Douglass put it in his scathing 1852 speech, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”: “From the slave’s point of view,” Douglass said, “the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker... than on this Fourth of July.” Americans, he said, were “false to the past.” To the slave, “your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity... your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.”

From the earliest days of the country’s history, African Americans have turned the Declaration into our reverberating jeremiad, the site of our possible redemption from our ugliest history. Historian Mia Bay says that black Americans found in the Declaration’s text a “*lingua franca* that could express their aspirations for liberty,” thereby locating in the very “American Political Tradition” they might have been excused for rejecting, “a mandate for African American emancipation.”

For Douglass, the “revolting barbarity” of slavery revealed “the hypocrisy of the nation.” But in the same speech he also spent more than half of his remarks admiring the nation’s founding. Indeed, throughout his

career, he reaffirmed the Declaration’s standard: With the “signers of the Declaration of independence,” he asserted, “nothing was ‘settled’ that was not right.” With them, “justice and liberty and humanity were *final*, not slavery and oppression.” Not long thereafter, Lincoln also called out Americans for celebrating the Fourth of July while tolerating the expansion of slavery. As he told a friend in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act: “the fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day — *for burning fire-crackers!!!*” (Emphasis, it should be noted, is Lincoln’s.)



Images courtesy Library of Congress.

The Declaration, in other words, reminds us — in prophetic fashion — that there are things unworthy of us as an American people. Martin Luther King Jr., however memorably, was only continuing a long American tradition when he identified the “gulf between

promise and fulfillment” and called upon Americans to change their practices and live out the “true meaning of [their] creed.” King took the words of the Declaration at face value. At the beginning of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, King said: “When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, black men as well as white men — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

It is *because* of our embrace of Jefferson’s claims about Americans that we today find the founding generation’s (and certainly Jefferson’s own) racial prejudice and participation in slavery not only hypocritical but inconsistent with the founding itself, fundamentally un-American. Even as historical study reminds us that both were, arguably, as American as apple pie for long stretches of our story — for which we endure consequences and bear responsibility to this day.

Keeping faith with the Declaration’s imagination

But speaking of apple pie... among the folksiest and most persuasive bits of wisdom about how the Declaration has worked in our political culture comes from Carrie Chapman Catt. President of the National Woman’s Suffrage Association, Catt insisted, two years before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, that “Woman suffrage became an assured fact when the Declaration of Independence was written.”

On its surface, the claim is preposterous. As a matter of historical record, Jefferson “and his compatriots,” she wrote, hadn’t been thinking about enfranchising women. And by 1917, of course, the United States had a solid history of excluding women from formal political participation. But Catt brushed this aside as if it were a gnat buzzing around Independence Hall. Once Americans “get the hang” of the Declaration, she said, they will be unable to any longer deny women the right to vote.

For her, taking the Declaration seriously cultivated a capacity for shame as well as pride, an openness to growth, to the possibility that our practice hitherto has been (suddenly *is*) “un-American.” Getting “the hang” of the Declaration, for Catt, involved the recognition that the Declaration calls us to go farther in our efforts to realize the meaning of American equality *now*, not remain shackled by what it could have meant *then*. Or, rather, that what it meant then would not be fully revealed until later, after generations of Americans had

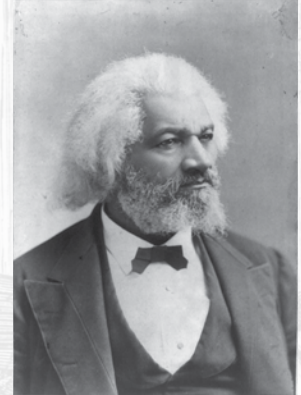
mined its deepest truths. Catt’s critical stance, then — like Douglass’ and Lincoln’s and King’s — was a keeping faith with the Declaration’s *imagination*, which cannot be confined even to that of its original authors, whose co-authors we become as we live into it.

If the United States became independent in 1776, but only retroactively, when do Americans become the people described in the second paragraph? The answer to that question is always open, never foreclosed as long as there is a United States of America.

And, so, the Declaration is our history but also our future, because it always slips outside of the conditions of its emergence and crashes into ours; we fulfill its assertions about Americans by becoming the people it insists that we are. But this becoming always depends on what we do now, on our capacity to resist either complacency or cynicism, a refusal to turn appropriately profound disappointment with ourselves into what historian Hannah Arendt called “reckless” despair and, instead, to make new things out of our old stories so that they can speak as if brand new to the circumstances and challenges our democratic life faces today.

In April 1859 — a particularly dark moment in American history — Lincoln wrote, “But soberly, it is *now* no child’s play to save the principles of Jefferson from total overthrow in this nation.”

Wherever we are in American history, Lincoln reminds us that it is always now.



Above: Carrie Chapman Catt. Below: Frederick Douglass. Images courtesy Library of Congress.

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