

The Cause of All Mankind

Reflections on the Declaration of Independence at 250

Daniel J. Sargent

I'd like to begin with a note of thanks: to Jane and to Peter. I have learned so much from both of you, and I am deeply appreciative of the invitation to speak today. To speak after Peter is a daunting assignment. But I am delighted, nonetheless, to be able to participate in the Faith250 initiative that Jane has led, in collaboration with our friends at Temple Isaiah.

The initiative has been an extraordinary success. It has also been a necessary success. It is salutary, in these rancorous and polarizing times, to be able to commemorate the semiquincentennial anniversary of American independence with dialogue that seeks common ground, in the spirit of our national motto: e pluribus unum.

In that spirit, I should commend Jane for reaching, today, across the deepest of historical chasms. As some of you may know, I was born in the United Kingdom, a subject of Her Majesty and a presumptive Anglican. I became a citizen of this republic only in 2010. So I am an American of recent vintage, one with lived historical experience of the tyranny of monarchs.

We can only speculate as to the possible implications of Jane inviting a British-born congregant to speak on this occasion. Perhaps my presence is an affirmation of the power of faith to bridge the deepest of chasms? Or perhaps my invitation confirms an even deeper—and more veiled—truth. Yes, Presbyterians can have a wicked sense of humor.

But I am not here to talk about myself. Rather, I am here to talk about ideas in American history. My argument is that ideas matter. But my first point is misaligned with that larger argument. The role of ideas in the events that separated America from the British Empire is often exaggerated, including by historians of the American Revolution.

To set the Declaration of Independence in its historical context, we must remember that the Revolution, in its inception, was about money and power. At stake between the British Empire and its North American colonists were the questions of who was going to reap the empire's benefits, and who was going to carry its burdens. The burdens in the 1760s included the crippling debt that the British Empire had incurred fighting what contemporaries called the "Great War for Empire": a worldwide struggle for colonial supremacy that had set the British Empire against France and Spain.

Great Britain tried, once the war had been won, to squeeze revenues from its colonies with new taxes, including duties on sugar and paper goods—the so-called Stamp Act. These taxes impugned the autonomy of colonial legislatures, and they provoked an almighty constitutional conflict. Was the British Empire a unified polity, over which Parliament exercised supreme jurisdiction? Or was the British Empire more akin to a federation of separate elements? On this basic question, Parliament and the North American colonists disagreed.

No factor drove the radicalization of the American Revolution so forcefully as the condescension with which Parliament received American demands. London's indifference left the colonists with a stark choice: submit or rebel. They chose rebellion, and their choice was bold. The men who signed the Declaration of Independence understood that they would be hanged as traitors, should their bid for independence fail.

But I want to focus not on their bravery, which was immense, but on their Declaration. The document that Congress affirmed on July 4 did not enact the separation of the United States from the British Empire; Congress had voted for independence two days earlier, on July 2. The Declaration's purpose was both explanatory and practical. Its authors sought to explain American independence to the world. And they sought to persuade prospective military allies, especially France and Spain, that American independence was a viable proposition.

Let's dwell, momentarily, upon the first proposition: to explain independence to the world. Why should this have mattered? It mattered because the leaders of the United States sought recognition for their union as a legitimate—and accepted—participant in the international system. Like the Dutch Republic, which had separated itself from the Spanish-Habsburg Empire two centuries earlier, the Americans sought recognition of their equal standing "among the powers of the Earth."

The Declaration of Independence was thus a statement of collective self-justification: an explanation of the American decision to secede. Britain's mismanagement of its North American colonies, the Declaration argues, justifies separation—and the assertion of equal standing in a world of sovereign states. Understood this way, the Declaration of Independence sits squarely in the arena of international relations. It is a landmark statement of a nation's right to self-determination.

But the equality of states in the international arena is not the only kind of equality that the Declaration affirms. Not at all. The philosophical heart of the Declaration, contained within a single sentence, makes a far more radical argument. “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.”

In this brilliant sentence, the Declaration makes two distinct moves. First, it enlists on behalf of its own revolutionary cause the language and the logic of universal human rights. And it consecrates a conflation that Thomas Paine had made six months earlier, in the pages of *Common Sense*. “The cause of America,” Paine wrote, “is the cause of all mankind.”

The Declaration of Independence thus proclaimed the United States to be a polity unique in the modern world: a republic dedicated and bound to universal purposes. Breathtaking in its audacity, this assertion of universalism set the United States apart from monarchies like France and Spain, which were dedicated to nothing greater than the glory of their monarchs.

The United States, from the outset, contemplated grander horizons. Like the ancient Israelites, the Americans understood themselves to be a particular people—but a people dedicated and bound to purposes vaster than mere interests, a people dedicated and bound to purposes that might, in time, elevate and ennoble the entirety of humanity.

The ambition was breathtaking, and so was the hypocrisy. “How is it,” asked Samuel Johnson, the British man of letters, “that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”

The question remains devastating. Thomas Jefferson, who was the Declaration's principal author, was also an enslaver of considerable magnitude. He enslaved other people's children, and he enslaved his own, at least those born to Sally Hemings, his companion and his slave. The color line dividing slavery from freedom would slice through

the family tree of Jefferson descendants—offering an intimate microcosm of a dilemma both ancient and, at the same time, so exquisitely, agonizingly American.

For sure, slavery was not unique to the American experience. Ubiquitous in world history, slavery became in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the basis for a transatlantic system of exploitation, through which Europeans extracted the wealth of the Americas. The colonies of British North America were not unique. Outside of New England, they exemplified a pattern of colonial society that plundered Native land and Black labor, in pursuit of power and profits.

Nor were Americans, contra Johnson, uniquely hypocritical. Great Britain's highest court in 1772 declared that slavery was impermissible in the British Isles, but the empire that Britons operated in the wider world was an empire for slavery. Indeed, the scale and the cruelty of the Barbados sugar colonies eclipsed those of Virginia's tobacco plantations.

What justified the contradiction, for Britons, was the premise that the world was divided into two parts. Within Europe, Christian principles prevailed, including the impermissibility of slavery. Outside Europe, no such constraints applied. Differentiation between Europe and non-Europe—between civilization and barbarism—was the foundation of modern international law.

The American Revolution sought to cross this divide. By asserting their standing within Europe's international system, Americans challenged the categorical division that set Europe and non-Europe apart. Their revolution was thus a foundational moment in the global history of decolonization—a process that would, over the next two hundred years, extend to many more nations the right of self-determination, the right to participate in the international society of nation-states.

And yet, the ugly reality remained. The Americans yearned to be part of the civilized world, but their society was a colonial society, more like Spanish Mexico than the British Isles.

Jefferson could not resolve the contradictions. Instead, he tried to foist responsibility elsewhere. In his first draft of the Declaration, Jefferson charged the British king with having “waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people.” These are Jefferson's words, and they affirm—quite clearly—that natural rights can admit no distinction of color. Alas, the Congress deleted the complaint, and the Declaration, as a result, would make no statement about enslavement.

Silence, we might surmise, was Jefferson's answer to his own immense hypocrisy. Never again did he address slavery with the same conviction that he mustered in the summer of 1776. But he glimpsed the inevitability of the reckoning. "I tremble for my country," Jefferson wrote, "when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever."

Jefferson's generation had anticipated—and even hoped—that slavery might, over time, wither away into obsolescence. History had other plans. Great Britain's Industrial Revolution made raw cotton the republic's most profitable export. From the 1820s, the result was the ascent of "King Cotton," as contemporaries called the concentrated economic and political power of slaveholders.

Apologists for slavery concocted a variety of arguments to justify the exclusion of enslaved people from the Declaration of Independence. One position held that the affirmation of rights in the Declaration was only ever intended to apply to white men. Stephen A. Douglas, the northern Democrat who debated Lincoln in 1858, took this position. To reconcile natural rights and slavery, Douglas embraced a categorical racism that thrust Black people outside of the category of rights-bearing humanity. Thereby did he reconcile his commitment to the inalienable rights of white men with his commitment to white supremacy.

A second position rejected the very premise that "all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights." For thinkers like John C. Calhoun, the great apologist for Southern nationalism, the doctrine of natural rights had been misbegotten from the outset. The foundations of the Declaration of Independence were philosophical nonsense, Calhoun argued.

If the Declaration mattered, Calhoun argued, its significance lay in its consecration of a new nation "among the powers of the Earth." Others went even further. George Fitzhugh, who ranked among the most extreme pro-slavery ideologues, declared the entire Jeffersonian apparatus—natural rights and equality—to be, and here I quote directly, "exuberantly false, and arborescently fallacious."

No single figure rescued the Declaration of Independence from the oblivion into which the likes of Fitzhugh and Calhoun intended to cast it. The rehabilitation and redemption of the Declaration was a collaborative project, in which many Americans played vital parts. The redeemers included Americans cast outside of the circle of rights holders in 1776—African Americans, especially.

In 1791, Benjamin Banneker wrote Thomas Jefferson a letter. A scientist and surveyor and free African American, Banneker implored Jefferson, who was then serving as Secretary of State, to live up to the universalism he had avowed in 1776. “One universal Father hath given being to us all,” Banneker wrote; “we are all of the same family, and stand in the same relation to him.”

Banneker invoked Jefferson’s Declaration, an invocation that other defenders of Black freedom would echo. David Walker, in his 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, deployed the Declaration of Independence and his own sophisticated analysis of Christian theology to argue for Black freedom—and equality. “See your Declaration, Americans,” Walker exclaimed. “Do you understand your own language?” The contrast was startling: where George Fitzhugh damned the Declaration to excuse American conduct, David Walker elevated the Declaration to damn American conduct.

Walker’s invocation became a common refrain in the Colored Conventions: the meetings of free African Americans that became, in the 1830s, the crucible of a Black political movement in the United States.

No one did more to carry that argument forward than Frederick Douglass. Born into slavery in Maryland around 1818—four decades after the Declaration—and living until 1895, Douglass escaped bondage to become an orator, an editor, and, by the 1850s, one of his country’s leading abolitionists. Like Banneker and Walker before him, he refused to surrender Jefferson’s Declaration; he dedicated his life instead to the realization of what he believed to be its true and universalist promise.

Douglass in 1852 delivered a seminal address: “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Echoing Walker, he elevated the Declaration, declaring its authors “great enough to give fame to a great age.” But the brilliance of the Declaration became, in Douglass’s agile hands, a brutal condemnation of American realities—and American moral cowardice. To celebrate the Fourth of July in an America that denied the humanity of black people, Douglass argued, was to succumb to moral blindness, even turpitude.

Still, Douglass seldom wavered in his determination to redeem America’s universalist promise from its sordid realities. History is full of contingencies, and the results of great struggles are seldom foreordained. But the election of 1860 precipitated much of the transformation that Douglass had sought. Abraham Lincoln was no radical abolitionist when he won election in 1860, but his opposition to slavery was strong enough to motivate

Southern secession. Fought at first to preserve the Union, the Civil War soon evolved into an abolition war.

For Abraham Lincoln, the Declaration stood in relation to this struggle as a transcendent touchstone. “All honor to Jefferson,” Lincoln had written in 1859. For Lincoln, what the Declaration affirmed was an “abstract truth”—natural rights and natural equality—that transcended any “struggle for national independence.” These values were, in Lincoln’s words, a “rebuke and a stumbling block” to “the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

By investing so much in the possibility of transcendent values, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass enacted the equivalent of a secular leap of faith. Faith suffused the Civil War. Fought in the shadows of the Second Great Awakening, the North’s war effort was drenched in religious language. “As He died to make men holy,” affirms the Battle Hymn of the Republic, “let us die to make men free.”

Lincoln’s assassination on Good Friday, 1865, sent the North into a paroxysm of devotion. The murdered president, declared one Boston preacher, had been “chosen by God to be the emancipator of a race and the savior of a nation.” In life, a cagey politician, Lincoln became in death the martyr whose sacrifice made possible his nation’s spiritual rebirth.

If Lincoln became the Civil War’s great martyr, Frederick Douglass experienced a happier destiny. The Civil War made him the greatest theologian of a reinvigorated American universalism. Others played more vital parts in the enactment of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which made the Constitution indisputably an antislavery document. But none did more than Douglass to reaffirm the premise of 1776: the premise that the greatest of nations lives for universal causes.

To grasp Douglass’s significance and his radicalism, situate him in a wider world-historical context. The United States, for Douglass, was the great exception. In a world of nation-states that looked backward—towards shared identity grounded in language, culture, and ethnicity—only Americans looked forward, towards a more perfect union.

The United States, Douglass argued, was a “composite nation,” a society that derived its unity from its commitment to universal rights, not from ethnicity or culture. Herein, in Douglass’s words, lay the true source of American “greatness and grandeur.” The United States, Douglass insisted, could become “the most perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family that the world has ever seen.” The cause of America, as

Thomas Paine had written, might yet become the cause of all mankind. In Douglass, that foundational premise achieved its fullest, and truest, expression.

Redemption, unfortunately, was not achieved in a single crisis. The Civil War ended slavery and remade the Constitution, but the late nineteenth century, in many respects, was inhospitable to the idea of natural rights and natural equality. Powerful intellectual and geopolitical headwinds pushed back the ideals that Frederick Douglass championed.

At home, the reintegration of the white South during the 1870s empowered white supremacists to resist civil rights. Far too many Northerners, moreover, shared the racial prejudices of the former slaveholders. The result was the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the downfall of Reconstruction, and the entrenchment of legal differentiation on the basis of race.

The hopes of Frederick Douglass gave way to the realities of Jim Crow, whose constitutional permissibility the Supreme Court affirmed in the infamous case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The Declaration of Independence was absent from the proceedings: even Justice Harlan's famous dissent argues from the Constitution, not the Declaration.

The majority in *Plessy* invoked an alternative authority: the dogma of natural racism. "Legislation," declared Justice Brown's opinion, "is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences." This summarized the dogma of the era. Racism was becoming the foundation for an entire world order.

Natural equality fell out of fashion during the nineteenth century. So did the idea of natural rights. Here, nobody expressed the spirit of the new era quite like Friedrich Nietzsche. For the German philosopher, the idea of natural rights was sentimental mush: the detritus of a Christian millennium that had entered its historical twilight.

Nietzsche led the charge, but the assault on natural rights came from many sides. Karl Marx ridiculed the idea of natural rights, which he called a "bourgeois" conceit. And the era's most influential philosophers—men like T.H. Green, F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet—argued that rights were a social creation, not a natural endowment. Human rights, by the end of the nineteenth century, were no longer the ontological reality that Thomas Jefferson had summoned in the summer of 1776.

Frederick Douglass, we might conclude, was not a man of his times, but a man of an earlier era. A man of the Enlightenment, Douglass stood in relation to his own times as a contrarian, even oppositional figure. His enduring commitment to the promise of 1776 made him both the last and the unlikeliest of our Founding Fathers. More than any other

man of the nineteenth century, Douglass kept the flame of the Jeffersonian Revolution alive.

Far more characteristic of the age was Woodrow Wilson, the political scientist and president of the United States. Woodrow Wilson was not indifferent to the Declaration, but he upended its meaning. Like Calhoun, Wilson interpreted the Declaration as a historical document that had solved problems in its own time, but which offered little probative guidance for later times.

The heart of the Declaration, for Wilson, lay in the bill of grievances against the British Crown. The Declaration's achievement, in Wilson's view, was not to affirm timeless and universal principles but to found a nation. "If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence," Wilson declared in 1911, "do not repeat the preface."

A devout Presbyterian, Wilson did not reject the role of providence in politics. But he relocated the locus of its expression—away from the individual and towards the nation-state, whose self-determination became the expression of divine purpose. Wilson was idealistic, but he conceived of the Declaration as a time-bound act that founded a national community within history, not as the expression of eternal principles.

This cut hard against the view that Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass had affirmed. For them, the Declaration was the moment when eternal values erupted into history: a moment of secular incarnation that could not be abandoned or undone. The Declaration, Lincoln believed, had summoned "abstract truth."

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Lincoln-Douglass outlook had become a minority view: sentimental and unserious in the eyes of critics, who viewed the world with a self-conceived realism, especially when it came to race. Here, the irony in Wilson is acute. The man who would carry a gospel of national self-determination to the world also segregated the federal civil service. Wilson extended a universal promise to the nations, even as he withdrew it from his own fellow citizens.

And yet, to accuse Wilson of betraying the Declaration would be too harsh. Rather, Wilson illuminates tensions that pervade the document, and which would vex the international society of nation-states in his time and in ours.

The Declaration, we must recall, made two quite different claims. The first affirmed the right of a people to govern itself, to assume a separate station among the powers of the earth. The second affirmed the equality and the rights of individual human beings. Wilson seized upon the first; Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, upon the second. Wilson's

reading hinged upon the Bill of Grievances; the Lincoln-Douglass reading upon the philosophical Preamble.

The history of the twentieth century, I would suggest, can be read as a struggle between these two theories: one affirming the rights of men under the law of Nature's God; the other, the rights of peoples under the laws of man.

Both claims are worthy; indeed, the two arguments would often be allies. But the history of the twentieth century, like the history of the United States, offers a powerful caution. Abandon the foundational premise of Thomas Jefferson's Preamble—the assertion of unalienable natural rights—and the results can be catastrophic. History offers ample illustration.

Nationalism, as a historical project, can be emancipatory, but it can also elevate the nation into an object of veneration, into what a theologian might call a false idol. Ideologies of racial supremacy, which pervaded the era of Woodrow Wilson, did much the same for ethnoracial groups.

Fascism exemplified humanity's propensity for idolatry. Enacted amid secular cataclysm and spiritual disenchantment, fascism made the nation an object of religious veneration. But fascism was not unique. Marxist-Leninists enacted lines of categorical division among human beings—between bourgeois and proletariat, between exploiter and exploited. In an era of disenchantment, political leaders invented new Molochs and new Golden Calves.

Humanity tumbled into the abyss in the first part of the twentieth century, and the experience prompted the rehabilitation of older ideas about political justice. Nobody in this era reached for the Declaration of Independence with more deliberate intent than Franklin Roosevelt, the president who led the United States through the Second World War.

Roosevelt insisted from the outset that the war must be fought to vindicate human freedoms. The January 1942 Declaration of the United Nations, which constituted the wartime alliance, was the first international agreement to use the words "human rights." But Roosevelt sought to ground his commitments in the soil of the American past.

In April 1943, Roosevelt took time from the war to dedicate the Jefferson Memorial. Jefferson's words, Roosevelt argued, called across the ages. America's "apostle of freedom," Roosevelt asserted, had "believed, as we believe, in certain inalienable rights." The

connection sparked across the centuries, and animated Roosevelt's war effort, as it had Lincoln's.

Jeffersonian language motivated Roosevelt's wartime cause, and it also animated the postwar settlement. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emerged from a process that Eleanor Roosevelt led, enshrined expansive human rights commitments at the heart of the postwar order.

For sure, human rights in the postwar world were often honored in the breach, or just dishonored. Even worse, the United States, which had done so much to build the new world order, perpetuated at home brutal practices of racial segregation that mocked the plain language of the Declaration.

But still the Declaration endured. As in the era of Frederick Douglass, the Declaration remained a touchstone for the champions of equality. None was more deliberate than Martin Luther King. The pastor and civil rights leader grappled at length with Jefferson's Declaration. In his 1961 speech, "The American Dream," he reminded listeners, pointedly, that the Declaration says "all men," not "some men," or "all white men." Two years later, in his speech at the March on Washington, King described the Declaration, famously, as an unfulfilled "promissory note." In the last sermon of his life, delivered at National Cathedral on March 31, 1968, King returned again to the Declaration.

King was not naive about history; he understood that Thomas Jefferson was not the "apostle of freedom" that Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed. King knew, as well as anyone did, that the Declaration had been a clarion for justice rung in a cruel and unjust society. But King was not naive about human nature. A deep theological thinker, he grappled with the pervasiveness and the ubiquity of sin.

King's preoccupation with sin—his own included—was, in so many ways, the source of his singular genius. It empowered him to lead with humility, to encounter his political opponents as brothers, and to resist the categorical division of humanity into opposing parts: the colonizer and the colonized, the insider and the outsider, the righteous and the damned.

Human beings, King insisted, are incapable of self-perfection. This instinct, which King owed to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, set him apart from the theological progressives of the early twentieth century. It set him apart, above all, from Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the social gospel, whose optimism about human nature King, as he matured, found himself unable to share. The path to righteousness, King came

to believe, begins with surrender—surrender to the truth and righteousness of God. King sought the Promised Land, but he disbelieved that men could build God’s Kingdom on their own.

King’s outlook, I think, echoes the prophet Isaiah, the eighth-century voice who grappled with the wages of a sinful nation, a nation that had rebelled against God. Isaiah’s verdict was harsh, but he entertained the prospect of redemption. To this end, Isaiah channels the voice of God: “Learn to do right,” he declares; “seek justice; defend the oppressed.”

Isaiah’s righteous fury yields, in time, to millennial hopefulness. Peoples and nations, he envisions, will turn towards Jacob’s God, and peace and righteousness will reign. Swords will be beaten into plowshares; spears into pruning hooks. The nations, Isaiah prophesies, will “walk in the light of the Lord.”

Prophecy, I think, is the truest description of the work that the Declaration of Independence does for our country, of the document’s enduring meaning. The philosophical preamble, which is the heart of the document, does not describe any world that has been. Rather, the Declaration affirms transcendent premises, impossible premises: the proposition that we are all equal and endowed, by the merest dint of our shared humanity, with dignity and rights that cannot be alienated from us.

Like prophecy, the Declaration describes not a world that is, but a world that could be. The Declaration is the line on the horizon of our aspirations, the eternal frontier towards which we strive. Like prophecy, it articulates the standards against which we must judge ourselves—and be judged. It affirms the purposes towards which we can choose to strive.

This, I think, is the sense of the Declaration that the greatest American prophets have grasped: Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King. This striving—their striving—is the essence of America, a country destined to remain a work in eternal progress.

So what, I will ask in conclusion, should we make of the Declaration in this 250th year of American independence?

Hold Thomas Jefferson to account, by all means. He was a slaveholder and a hypocrite who denied to the people he enslaved the equality and rights that he avowed. And yet, we should temper our reaction with the understanding that future generations will judge us too, for our own hypocrisies and failures.

Most important, do not allow exasperation with the men of 1776—imperfect as they were—to alienate us from the principles of 1776, which are their enduring legacy. We have witnessed, in American experience, the consequences of forgetting the Declaration’s transcendent logic—the consequences of engaging 1776 only as a moment of rupture, when one people declared their independence from another and constituted themselves as a separate nation.

1776 marks a moment of rupture. But division, I would argue, is not the Declaration’s ultimate argument. Unity is. The Declaration breaks bonds between two peoples, but it affirms the political meaning of humanity, a category united and indivisible. Thus conceived, the Declaration is not merely our Declaration. It also belongs to the Rohingya refugee, to the Uyghur prisoner, and to the Palestinian child. It is the statement that consecrates Thomas Paine’s promise: “The cause of America is the cause of all mankind.”

Set against this universal conception of the Declaration, any nationalism that venerates the nation as an end unto itself—any nationalism that revels in secular power and its acquisition, any nationalism that fixates on the nation’s greatness, any nationalism that marginalizes and excludes—is a petty and uninspiring creed.

Our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson included, were not perfect men; they were merely men. But they bequeathed a purpose greater than self-interest; they founded a cause for which martyrs like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King paid with their lives. The anniversary of the Declaration is a time for celebration, yes, but it is also a moment for remembrance and, above all, for rededication to the words that made America.