

(celebration of freedom of America)

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Today marks the 206th anniversary of the adoption by the Continental Congress of the Declaration of Independence. Although the United States was in the midst of a bloody war (the actual fighting had been going on sporadically since Lexington and Concord in 1775) and would not be victorious until Cornwallis handed over his sword to General Washington at Yorktown five years later, we Americans celebrate our independence by memorializing a document. This is, I think, unique in the annals of world revolutionary history -- that the most sacred national political holiday is reserved for a piece of parchment; not battles or beheadings, not destruction of life and ~~liberty~~ property, but ~~any~~ statement, in classic terms, of the meaning of human dignity, freedom, and resistance to tyranny. French independence day celebrates the storming of the dreaded Bastille; Russian independence day celebrates the beginning of the massacre known as the October Revolution; South African independence day lauds the Boer victory over the Zulu nation at Blood River in the 1830's, site of one of the world's worst slaughters.

Why, then, do Americans cherish so dearly the memory of the Declaration? Historically, the adoption of this document by Congress on the 4th of July (in fact, Jefferson's masterpiece was not signed and ratified by all the states until the middle of August) was the last link in a chain that tied the former colonies to Great Britain. Even though America had been at war since the preceding year, there were voices of reconciliation, compromise, and patience still audible over the general bluster and confusion of revolutionary fervor. Many good men in the spring and summer of 1776 still pleaded with the leaders to take a more cautious course of action, begging them not to blunder into a set of circumstances that might prove disastrous in the long run. These men, many of whom would become Tories and actively support the British in years to come, were silenced by the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. More important than this, however, was the irreconcilability of the action taken by Congress. Americans realized, in an instant, that their greatest hopes for freedom lay entirely in their hands. They had burned their bridges behind them. Never again could there be honest talk of a reconciliation with the Mother Country. They were irretrievably at war; not as mere rebellious colonies grasping for a higher station, but as a unified country, a nation among nations, daring to confront and do battle with the mightiest of European empires.

But there are other reasons as well which make this day so special to Americans. Rarely in human history has a young nation, striving for liberty, been so blessed by capable, intelligent, prescient, and youthful leaders. In 1776 Jefferson was 33, Washington 44, Adams 41, Hamilton only 19, Patrick Henry 40, James Madison 25. Benjamin Franklin, it is true, was 70 and as such was considered the Patriarch of Revolution. But his exuberance and vitality matched those of the younger generation and contributed greatly to the spirit of youthful enterprise exhibited by the leaders. These young men had been educated in the pursuit of Reason personified by the philosophers of the Enlightenment (Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, et al). The Declaration of Independence is basically a product of Enlightenment philosophy, a document which reflects the ideas most prevalent among educated men in the late 18th century. This is stated most clearly in the second paragraph of the Declaration:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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. That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.



This was not radical, revolutionary rhetoric. Jefferson and his peers had studied modern thinkers with great scrutiny. The Declaration is a distillation of educated thought and debate, combined with Reason, adjusted to the exigencies of the age.

What makes the Declaration of Independence so fascinating to historians is that it is not, as many believe, the product of a single man's mind. When Richard Henry Lee asked the Congress to draw up a resolution of independence in June 1776 a committee was formed to frame the document. On this committee of five were three exceptional men of differing temperaments, abilities, and insights: Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania. By a strange quirk of fate, Adams and Jefferson were to die on the same day: July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration. Adams, who did not know that Jefferson had passed away several hours earlier in Monticello, gasped 'Jefferson still lives!' minutes before his own death.

Jefferson was assigned to do the actual writing after the five had met to discuss what the document's most pertinent points should be. It is not well-known that Jefferson wrote and Revised the Declaration a number of times, deferring to the intelligent criticisms of the sagacious Franklin and ever-competitive, fiery Adams. The final product, then, is not wholly Jefferson's (although the Declaration is clearly Jeffersonian in style and construction) but, rather, a corporate effort necessitated by the passionate conflicts which permeated the Continental Congress.

Perhaps the most brilliant facet of this statement of wrongs and abuses suffered by the American people is that the King, George III, and not Parliament was given the entire blame for the list of grievances. This was a clever idea of the authors' -- to conflict the yearnings of the Americans not against a democratically-elected Parliament (which, after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, effectively ruled Great Britain), but against a hated symbol of despotism, the monarchy of England. Thomas Paine's Common Sense had been published early in 1776 and it had enflamed American patriots against the concept of monarchy. The Declaration was merely a further development of this anti-monarchical thinking. Throughout the world anti-monarchists were on the ascendancy. The next 25 years would see many nations throw of the yoke of rule by kings: in France, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, etc.

As Americans we have much to be proud of. 206 years ago the Declaration of Independence created the world's first republican democracy and the model for many other peoples also striving to break the bonds of colonialism and imperialism. Although, admittedly, the problems we face today in the world are vaster and infinitely more complex than those of two centuries ago, history has great value to those interested in understanding the human condition and response to adversity. And by harking back to the sacred days of yesterday I do not mean that the Americans of today should wallow in the stagnant waters of self-righteousness and complacency. Those who are satisfied with the present state of things cannot possibly hope to deal adequately with the challenges that face us in the years to come. Change is a necessary component of the living organism -- none of the American leaders in the revolutionary period would have condoned standing still when the world cried out for action.

What we desperately need now are new ideas, new strategies, new ways of coping with ourselves and the world of which we are all citizens. When Jefferson said, 'I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, for the blood of revolution waters the tree of Liberty' he was not advocating a series of yearly uprisings against the status quo. Rather, like other brilliant thinkers of his time, he realized that a united people developing in commerce, politics, and social welfare, channeling their energies in the building

of a great nation, must constantly reassess the ideas and policies under which they are directed. As we meet here today in Singida to celebrate American independence let us resolve among ourselves to ask the difficult questions, to strip away the mythology and destroy the shibboleths, to demand and secure competent leadership which will deal honestly, faithfully, and democratically with the vexing problems of the world at-large.

Asante sana!

*(Thank you very much)*