

American Liberalism inside "United States Declaration of Independence"

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ABSTRACT

"All men are created equal" is written in the Declaration of Independence. It means natural rights. So the theory not only provides a reasonable basis for the United States to be independent from the British Government, but also affects the direction of the United States in the future and the spirit of democratic government. The Declaration has often been invoked to protect the rights of individuals and the marginalized groups, and has come to represent a moral standard for which the United States should strive. It sparked the fire of the Civil War by influencing Abraham Lincoln. This view greatly influenced Abraham Lincoln, who considered the Declaration to be the foundation of his political philosophy, and who promoted the idea that the Declaration is a statement of principles through which the United States Constitution should be interpreted.

Influenced by the Declaration of Independence, Martin Luther King quoted the content and the spirit of the Declaration of Independence again in his famous speech, "I Have a Dream," addressing to the masses in Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC on August 28, 1963.

"I Have a Dream" and "The Declaration of Independence" had injected ideology, liberty and equality, into the political system through the bargain and compromise. The civic awareness in the United States is built on freedom and institutional overlapping consensus. They also become a modern democratic political system and impact on the present international political situation indirectly.

Keywords : Common Sense, The United States Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King, Jr.



I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars had emphasized religious tolerance, natural rights, and ideological separation of powers in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Such political thought took root in Europe first, but has been in blossom in the North America. "The United States Declaration of Independence" reflects such political thinking, causing British colonials to be free from the colonization of the Britain. The "Declaration of Independence" is to elaborate a political philosophy of freedom that means a citizen has the right to establish and to overthrow his own government.

The United States Declaration of Independence is a statement adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776.¹ The birthday of the United States of American Independence Day is celebrated on July 4, the day the wording of the Declaration was approved by Congress. It announced that the thirteen American colonies then at American Revolutionary War with Great Britain were now independent states, and thus no longer a part of the British Empire in the "Declaration of Independence". The Declaration justified the independence of the United States by listing colonial grievances King George III, and by asserting certain natural rights, including a right of revolution.

The first sentence of the Declaration asserts that a people exercises natural law to assume political independence and acknowledges that the grounds for such independence must be reasonable and expectable.

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.

The next section, the famous preamble, includes the ideas and ideals that are principles of the Declaration. It is also an assertion of what is known as the "right of revolution": that is, people have certain rights, and when a government violates these rights, its people have the right to "alter or abolish" that government.²

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,³ that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are

¹ Becker, *Declaration of Independence*, p. 5.

² Becker, *Declaration of Independence*, p. 9.

³ The published Declaration uses "unalienable", rather than the now more common "inalienable". This appears to simply be a stylistic issue, and some drafts, notably that by Thomas Jefferson, used inalienable. See: Unalienable / Inalienable (<http://www.ushistory.org/DECLARATION/unalienable.htm>)



instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

"All men are created equal" has been called one of the best-known sentences in the English language"⁴ and "the most potent and consequential words in American history."⁵ The Declaration is based on the right of freedom, conveying philosophy in the Enlightenment age, which the English political theorist, John Locke usually cited as one of the primary influences on the Declaration.⁶ Locke's "natural rights" as a propaganda tool provides a legitimate basis of founding the United States.

"All men are created equal" is written in the Declaration of Independence, which means natural rights. So this sentence not only provides a reasonable basis for the United States to be independent from the British Government, but also affects the direction of the United States in the future and the spirit of democratic government. The Declaration has often been invoked to protect the rights of individuals and marginalized group, and has come to represent for many people a moral standard for which the United States should strive. This view greatly influenced Abraham Lincoln, who considered the Declaration to be the foundation of his political philosophy,⁷ and who promoted the idea that the Declaration is a statement of principles through which the United States Constitution should be interpreted.

The Declaration would have its most prominent influence on the debate over slavery. The Declaration's relationship to slavery was taken up in 1854 by Abraham Lincoln, a former Congressman who idolized the Founding Fathers.⁸ Lincoln thought that the Declaration of Independence expressed the highest principles of the American Revolution, and that the Founding Fathers had tolerated slavery with the expectation that it would ultimately wither away.⁹ The United States Civil War was affected by Declaration of Independence. In the first paragraph of "The Gettysburg Address," Lincoln had referred:¹⁰

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

⁴ Lucas, *Justifying America*, p. 85.

⁵ Ellis, *American Creation*, p. 55-56.

⁶ Harvey, Ray Forrest(1937). *Jean Jacques Burlamaqui: A Liberal Tradition in American Constitutionalism*. Chapel Hill, N.C., p. 120.

⁷ McPherson, *Second American Revolution*, p. 126.

⁸ Maier, *American Scripture*, p. 201~02.

⁹ McPherson, *Second American Revolution*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Historian James McPherson has called it *The most eloquent expression of the new birth of freedom brought forth by reform liberalism*, in McPherson, James M. *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p.185 Google Book Search. Retrieved on November 27, 2007.



equal.....It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

This speech is as one of the greatest speeches in American history. It would like to express that human beings are born equal. The idea of equality is a goal to pursue the founding of the United States, to affect the Civil War and the survival of the United States. The black civil rights movement in 1960s was affected by the Declaration of Independence, too. Dr. Martin Luther King was to the masses on August 28, 1963, in Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC. The title is "I have a dream". It quoted the content and spirit of the Declaration of Independence again. In the content of I have a dream that Dr. Martin Luther King had mentioned.¹¹

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..... With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

II. AMERICAN LIBERALISM INSIDE "UNITED STATES DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE"

Carl Baker in his book, "*On the Declaration of Independence - History of Political Thought*" indicates that the purpose of the Declaration of Independence is to convince the behavior of the United States by listing colonial grievances King George III justified to the world and to find a legitimate basis for a moral and legal. The function of "Declaration of Independence" is a political declaration. It is an instigating revolution publicity material. It is designed with the diction not as a rebellious defense, but the purpose is to prove the King's foresight in the colony to establish his tyranny, in a long complaining list of King, the most important thing is that King's behavior is out of intentional and ill-motivated.¹²

The concept of United States Declaration of Independence is "natural rights". The idea is acceptable. It accessed the identity of the people during the colonial period. It expresses that American Independence Revolution against the United Kingdom is truth. It came out of the incentive morale with this political philosophy. Jefferson sent a letter to Madison on August 30,

¹¹ Hansen, D, D. (2003). *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. p. 177.

¹² Song, p. 45. *Grounded on these foundations are the two central values of liberalism: equality and liberty.*



1823. Jefferson wrote "when he drafted the Declaration of Independence, he had not any reference books on his hand. The idea was popular in the colonies. There are no new views and ideas in the Declaration of Independence" in this letter.¹³

As Bacon said, "Knowledge is power." If knowledge is transferred into common sense, then it becomes a general consensus. It would be more powerful at last. So Declaration of Independence by Jefferson is an official declaration of American Independence Revolution.¹⁴ Jefferson sent a letter to Charlie Henry, Lee on May 28, 1825. It described the similar ideas in this letter. He wrote "He had drafted the Declaration of Independence. His purpose is not to seek those people who have never been the thinking over the new principles or new ideas, nor is to illustrate those problems which have not been raised. His aim is that common sense should be placed in the front of the people". Jefferson revealed the ideological content of the Declaration of Independence is widely acknowledged in the late of eighteenth-century Europe. It is common sense. The strength of Declaration of Independence just had expressed that it exists in everyone's mind.

United States Declaration of Independence declares the basic human right. Every person regardless of his color in America has the right. This spirit had prompted the U.S. Congress passed "the Civil Rights Act" in June, 1964. It announced that the policy of racial segregation and discrimination is illegal. It proved that United States Declaration of Independence published on the July 4, 1776 has been playing an important role in America until now. The black civil right movements in 1960s have accessed bases on the Declaration of Independence. Thank to the Declaration of Independence, the black civil rights has been guaranteed with the constitution. The Declaration of Independence had been contributing integration between ethnic groups in the United States indirectly. The integration between ethnic groups promotes the first black President Barack Obama in 2008.¹⁵

III. "COMMON SENSE" BY THOMAS PAINE

The pamphlet, *Common Sense*, advocates colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain.¹⁶ Thomas Paine has a claim to the title *The Father of the American Revolution* because of *Common Sense*, the pro-independence monograph pamphlet he anonymously published on January 10, 1776. The pamphlet became an immediate success.¹⁷ It

¹³ McGowan, J. (2007) "Neoconservatism". *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. P. 124~33, ISBN 0-807-83171-9.

¹⁴ Alterman, Eric. *Why We're Liberals*. New York: Viking Adult, 2008. ISBN 0-670-01860-0.

¹⁵ Arnold, N. Scott. *Imposing values: an essay on liberalism and regulation*, New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992. ISBN 0-313-27418-5.

¹⁶ Saul K. Padover, *Jefferson: A Great American's Life and Ideas*, New York: The New American Library, 1952, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Introduction to Rights of Man*, Howard Fast, 1961.



quickly spread among the literate, and, in three months, 100,000 copies sold throughout the American British colonies (with only two million free inhabitants), making it a best-selling work in the eighteenth-century America.¹⁸ The pamphlet appeared in January 1776, after the Revolution started. The pamphlet had little direct influence on the Continental Congress's decision to issue a Declaration of Independence, since that body was more concerned with how declaring independence would affect the war effort.¹⁹ Paine's great contribution was in initiating a public debate about independence, which had previously been rather muted.²⁰ Thus "Common Sense" (in this view) equates to the knowledge and experience which most people already have, or which the person using the term believes that they do or should have. "Common Sense" introduced no new idea,²¹ and probably had little direct effect on Congress's thinking about independence; its importance was in stimulating public debate on a topic that few had previously dared to openly discuss.²² Public support for separation from Great Britain steadily increased after the publication of Paine's enormously popular pamphlet.²³

"Common Sense" was published on January 10, 1776 before United States Declaration of Independence was delivered. There are only forty-seven pages in this pamphlet. Its content is described that people could have freedom in a truly equal society after setting out to eradicate any form of class system. So "Common Sense" inspires colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain, and determines to fight for freedom. Even some people think that he will not be able to understand the history of the United States and its founding spirit if he has never read "Common Sense".

"Common Sense" had been thought that every intellectual people should have read this pamphlet in the thirteen states. Paine had inherited the idea of early liberalism and individualism, so he believed the government is only a necessary evil in the best case; the government causes no endure in the worst case. "Common Sense" also had pointed out that using force to resolve the dispute, because it was decided to resort to force is selected by the King George III. Finally, Paine had yelled the slogan, "independent."²⁴ Paine's "Common Sense" is to launch the ideological soul of the American War of Independence. Dr. Robert B. Downs had listed the "Common Sense" as "one of these changing history books." As we can

¹⁸ Oliphant, John; *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution: Library of Military History*. Paine, Thomas. Charles Scribner's Sons (accessed via Gale Virtual Library).

¹⁹ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 90~91.

²⁰ Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 89.

²¹ Jensen, *Founding*, p. 667.

²² Rakove, *Beginnings of National Politics*, p.89; Maier, *American Scripture*, p. 33.

²³ Maier, *American Scripture*, p. 33~34.

²⁴ 黃延齡,〈美國《獨立宣言》的思想威力〉,《歷史月刊》,200年1月號,p.34。



understand that "Common Sense" had played a decisive key role in the colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain.

"Common Sense" has such a huge influence. It could change the history of mankind. Because of people in American already has the "Common Sense" discussed the political philosophy, they could lead to such a powerful resonance. They could play instigated a wave of utility. The early North American immigrants were from the United Kingdom. All of them were Puritans. The first settlers had taken the ship, May Flower, to the United States in 1620. They were looking for religious freedom. The religious doctrine and admonition includes the idea of freedom and equality. North American immigrants had contributed a new country in their mind and had resolved any kind of political disputes with the philosophy.²⁵ Most of American history scholars summarized three factors economy, religion, and politics, for colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain.

The majority of immigrants in Europe had left home to America for obtaining much more economic opportunities. This motivation is often due to yearning for freedom of religion and escaping political oppression. They have a strong determination to establish their own ideal new country, so the colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHY OF "UNITED STATES DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE"

The main idea in Declaration of Independence is "all men are created equal". Everyone has the right to exist and pursue the ultimate happiness. The idea has been spreading around the world through Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Martin Luther's "I Have a Dream" to promote the universal values of a democratic countries in the world today. The Declaration of Independence emphasizes that every one has a same foothold and an equal opportunity. This influence has been affecting from the past to the early 20th century. It is still flourishing, such as social movements, women pursuing equality with men, in 1960s. The slogan, gender equality, resounds throughout the world.²⁶

The philosophy of "all men are created equal" in United States Declaration of Independence has been affecting the development of democratic politics in the world. The colonies of all over the world required for the independence after the end of the Second World War. All of them were impacted by The United States Declaration of Independence. The political view, all men are created equal, has been driving people's thinking in America. At last, it has promoted colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain successfully. We can thus realize that the democratic thinking advocated in the Declaration

²⁵ 曾國祥，〈美國革命與《聯邦論文集》的憲政觀〉，歷史月刊，第198期，p.102。

²⁶ 黃延齡，〈美國《獨立宣言》的思想威力〉，《歷史月刊》，200年1月號，p.36。



was politically powerful enough to change the history of mankind.²⁷

V. CONCLUSION

United States Declaration of Independence not only contributed to the success of the American Revolution, but also revealed the value of all human beings. It has included the center of faith, all men are created equal, and certain unalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This is the human universal values. The human universal values not only are the spirit of the founding of the United States, but also affect other countries.

Thanks to the founding fathers' the political wisdom of, American society has got a successful historical achievement. They had merged the unique value of freedom and equality into the Declaration of Independence. They had injected ideology, liberty and equality, into the political system through the bargain and compromise. The civic awareness in the United States is built on freedom and institutional overlapping consensus. They also become modern democratic political system and impact on the present international political situation indirectly.

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²⁷ 曾國祥，〈美國革命與《聯邦論文集》的憲政觀〉，歷史月刊，第 198 期，p.104。



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從《獨立宣言》看美國的自由思想

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摘要

《獨立宣言》所提到的“人人生而平等”的天賦人權說，不僅提供了美國脫離英國政府殖民地的合理基礎，也影響了美國日後建國的方向，並且成為民主政治的主流精神，這種精神也在美國的制憲過程中，儘管各州環境不同，思想歧異，有所堅持，但是各州制憲代表中能摒除歧見，終於完成美國憲法。

《獨立宣言》也影響了美國的南北戰爭，林肯在《Gettysburg Address》的演說以及1963年8月28日，Dr. Martin Luther King 在首都華盛頓林肯紀念堂前，向群眾發表《I Have a Dream》，皆再度引述了《獨立宣言》的內容與精神。

現今，美國社會能夠獲得這樣的歷史成就，實在要歸功於開國先賢所獨具的政治智慧，將“自由、平等”的價值放入《獨立宣言》裏，更進一步，善用折衝和妥協的政治藝術，將《獨立宣言》中的“自由、平等”思想注入到政治制度裏，美國的公民意識是建立在自由與制度相互交疊的共識之上，才有今日的美國民主政治制度的形成，間接影響到現今的國際政治局勢。

關鍵詞：常識、美國獨立宣言、林肯、金恩。

