**CE.2b The Declaration of Independence Notes**

July 4, 1776

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the American political tradition. It articulates the fundamental ideas that form the American nation: All men are created free and equal and possess the same inherent, natural rights. Legitimate governments must therefore be based on the consent of the governed and must exist “to secure these rights.”

As a practical matter, the Declaration of Independence announced to the world the unanimous decision of the thirteen American colonies to separate themselves from Great Britain. But its true revolutionary significance—then as well as now—is the declaration of a new basis of political legitimacy in the sovereignty of the people. The Americans’ final appeal was not to any man-made decree or evolving spirit but to rights inherently possessed by all men. These rights are found in eternal “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” As such, the Declaration’s meaning transcends the particulars of time and circumstances.

The circumstances of the Declaration’s writing make us appreciate its exceptionalist claims even more. The war against Britain had been raging for more than two years when the Continental Congress, following a resolution of Richard Henry Lee on June 7, 1776, appointed a committee to explore the independence of the colonies from Great Britain. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston turned to their colleague Thomas Jefferson to draft a formal declaration which they then submitted, with few corrections, to Congress. On July 2 Congress voted for independence and proceeded to debate the wording of the Declaration, which was, with the notable deletion of Jefferson’s vehement condemnation of slavery, unanimously approved on the evening of July 4. Every Fourth of July, America celebrates not the actual act of independence (proclaimed on July 2) but rather the public proclamation of the principles behind the act.

The Declaration has three parts—the famous Preamble, a list of charges against King George III, and a conclusion. The Preamble summarizes the fundamental principles of American self-government. The list of charges against the king presents examples of the violation of those principles. The stirring conclusion calls for duty, action, and sacrifice.

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**Preamble (and first paragraph)**. Although a document justifying revolutionary war, the Declaration argues throughout on the basis of universal reason by paying “decent respect to the opinions of mankind” and appealing to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”

*Self-Evident Truths.* The Declaration bases America and its government on self-evident truths such as human equality and certain “unalienable rights.” The truths are self-evident, not in the sense of being immediately obvious to everyone, but rather in presenting the logical or evident conclusion of what enlightened humanity understands by a human being. Self-evident truths are also not restricted to any one era or nation; they are as true today as they were in 1776, as true in America as they are in contemporary China or in ancient Greece. To enforce those rights is the challenge of American politics.

*Rights.* Such rights are acknowledged and affirmed liberties inherent in human nature—the right to own property, for example. They are not merely powers, and neither are they simply wishes or desires. “[E]ndowed by their Creator,” these rights transcend the ability of any government to destroy them (though killing or enslaving the men and women who possess these rights is, of course, another matter). Thus, these inherent or natural rights produce *legitimate* government and deny the legitimacy of any government justified merely on, for example, heredity, religion, class, race, or wealth.

*Equality.* So conceived, American government is fundamentally about rights or liberty. But these rights follow from the equality of all men. This precedence of equality obviously does not mean an equality of strength, character, batting averages, or writing skill; nor does it demand a communistic equality of results or condition. In fact the Declaration’s idea of equality would forbid such an arbitrary leveling of the naturally diverse human condition. Whatever our differences, there exists a fundamental human identity—that no one is born to rule or be ruled. Equality in this sense therefore requires that legitimate government be based on “the consent of the governed.”

*The Pursuit of Happiness.* The purpose of such a legitimate government in turn is to protect “certain unalienable rights,” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Rights culminate in the pursuit (that is, the vocation, not the chase) of happiness. And happiness is not about self-satisfaction or stupefied pleasure but rather a life lived to its full potential—human flourishing.

*The Right of Revolution.* Politically, the most important right is the right of self-government, which the whole Declaration elaborates upon, in theory and practice. Violation of government by consent calls forth the right, if not the duty, of “the people” (not any angry individual or mob) to “alter or to abolish” a government destructive of rights and to “institute new government” that will bring about “their safety and happiness.” Throughout the Declaration we see attention to both life’s necessities (“safety” or the right to life) and highest aspirations (“happiness”).

**Indictment**. The 27 charges against the king list in increasing severity his violations of American colonists’ civil, political, and natural rights. The Declaration lays out a “long train of abuses” culminating in “absolute tyranny.” Legitimate revolutions—those that protect the natural rights of the people—require more than “light and transient causes.” The king has interfered with our rights not only to our pursuit of happiness but also to liberty and to life itself.

**Conclusion**. The king is a tyrant, “unfit to be the ruler of a free people,” deaf to the pleas of justice and humanity. The Congress is forced to proclaim the colonies free and independent states, and the delegates pledge to each other their “Lives, … Fortunes and … sacred Honor.”

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Almost fifty years later, Jefferson described the Declaration as “an expression of the American mind…. All its authority rests … on the harmonizing sentiments of the day….” The Declaration weaves together philosophy, theology, and political history, both the American mind and American experience. A secular document, the Declaration nonetheless needs religion for its authority. Thus, God is mentioned or referred to four times, in three capacities: legislator (Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God), Creator (or executive), Supreme Judge of the world, and as guardian (divine Providence).

The first of the four organic laws of the United States, the Declaration may lack legal force but remains nonetheless the source of all legitimate political authority. No wonder the Declaration’s greatest expositor, Abraham Lincoln, referred to it as more than “a merely revolutionary document.” For the first time a nation constituted itself on what it has in common with all other people throughout geographic place and history and thus gave hope and inspiration to the whole world. The Declaration created America and with it a “new order of the ages” (*novus ordo seclorum*) in the history of human self-government.