

THE FAMILY HERITAGE SERIES



A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those “heirs of all the ages” who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.

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Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society.

June-July 1973 — Volume I, Lesson Fifteen

The Declaration Of Independence

LESSON IDEA

To show that the Declaration of Independence is based on God-given, not government-given, rights.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence (see last page), so that each member of the family can study the words as they are read in the lesson.

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LET'S GO BACK to the time trip we started last week and find out what happened after England went to war against the colonial army of musket-toting farmers, woodsmen and merchants. In 1775 and the early months of 1776, it was still a British family fight, with the soldiers and ships of the English giant lodged in Boston and Washington's army of volunteers rimming the west edge of the city — each waiting for the other to back down. Neither did.

As the Second Continental Congress, still in session in Philadelphia, struggled to find food, uniforms, and ammunition for Washington's troops, the talk grew of cutting all ties with England. In January, Massachusetts passed a resolution for independence. In April, North Carolina took the bold step. Then, Rhode Island; and one month later, Virginia declared her own independence from England. New York and Pennsylvania opposed the break; but in other colonies, the idea began to gain momentum.

Finally, on June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia asked the Congress to vote on the resolution, “That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all

allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

THE TIME FOR decision had come, but it had to be unanimous. If some colonies voted “yes” while others voted “no,” England would take advantage of the division, and defeat would be certain. Rather than press for a immediate decision, the colonists delayed voting until July 2.

But to save time in the event the resolution passed unanimously, Congress appointed a committee of five — John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston — to prepare a declaration detailing the reasons for the break with England. Even an unanimous “yes” to Lee's resolution was not enough. The delegates wanted a formal statement that all men and governments could read, making clear that their quarrel with England was much bigger than a tax dispute or a fight over who had what rights. They meant to question the right of a king to be a king — the idea of a man being a god of government who could give and take liberties as he saw fit. For many thousands of years kings, pharaohs, and emperors had been venerated and even worshiped as the source of rights. Few persons had dared look such deified beings straight in the eye and say: “Behind your ermine, velvet robes, and diamond crowns, you are man — no more or less kingly than any one of us. Any rights you have come from the same place ours do, the Supreme Being who created you. And because of this, we have rights by birth — not by your decrees.”

The idea of God-given, not king-given or government-given, liberties had sparked the drive for independence and nationhood. It was the only reason important

enough to cause colonial leaders to pull away from the protection of the English empire and to risk defeat and death by challenging the British army and navy.

THE FIVE-MAN COMMITTEE appointed to prepare the Declaration of Independence asked Thomas Jefferson of Virginia to do the writing. The tall, freckled, sandy-haired Jefferson was known for his mastery of the language. A speaker he was not — in fact, he hadn't attempted a single speech during his year in Congress — but with pen and paper, he had few equals.

For three weeks the Virginian worked diligently on the Declaration, using a portable writing desk he had invented. His lodgings were simple, a second-floor parlor and bedroom in the house of a Philadelphia bricklayer.

While Jefferson searched for the exact words to set the idea of God-given rights before the world, the speech-makers and debaters — persuasive men like John Adams and his cousin Samuel — hammered home the logic of independence to undecided and unwilling delegates — particularly from Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and New York.

Since each colony had a single vote, determined by the majority of its delegates, the task was not to convince every delegate but a majority of each colonial delegation. By July 1, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and even New York, where British sentiment was strongest, looked favorable. The only delegation still in doubt was Delaware which had three representatives — Thomas McKean and Caesar Rodney who were for independence and George Read who felt the move was premature and would vote “no.” But Rodney was not in Philadelphia. He had been called home to squelch a pro-British uprising. To make the eighty-mile ride to Pennsylvania in time for the July 2 vote was a great deal to expect of anyone, particularly a man in Rodney's condition. The forty-eight-year-old bachelor suffered almost constant pain from a cancer that had spread over half his face. Physicians had advised him to seek treatment in Europe, but he refused to leave the colonies in their crisis.

On the evening of July 1, Rodney was riding toward Philadelphia through a blinding thunderstorm, stopping only long enough to change horses at the homes of friends. On the morning of July 2, only a few minutes before John Hancock, President of the Congress, called the session to order, Rodney arrived at the meeting room, weary and mud-splattered, still shod in boots and spurs.

THE ROLL CALL vote began. Two Pennsylvanians who couldn't bring themselves to vote “yes” had stayed away from the State House, enabling their delegation to vote for independence. New York declined to vote either way; South Carolina gave in for the sake of unanimity. When Delaware was called, Caesar Rodney pulled himself to his feet to say, “As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of Independence, and my judgment concurs, I vote for Independence!” The issue was decided. Twelve colonies had voted unanimously for nationhood and separation from England; New York, the colony the British had counted on to vote against independence, had remained silent.

As soon as Lee's resolution was adopted, Congress took up debate on the Declaration of Independence which Jefferson had finished and Adams, Franklin, Sherman, and Livingston approved. Now the arguments began over the specific words and phrases that Jefferson had penned. From July 2 to the evening of July 4, the debate went on until the document met the approval of all.

Let's look at the final product — the freedom declaration that brought shouts of approval and the ringing of the Liberty Bell in July, 1776. There are three main parts — first, the reason for the Declaration being written; second, the heart of the argument, which was the idea of God-given rights instead of King-granted or government-given liberties; and finally, a list of specific charges against King George. Here's the opening paragraph. [*Distribute copies of the first two paragraphs to each member of the family. Seeing the words as they are read leaves a more lasting impact than merely hearing them.*]

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

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

What were the specific charges the colonists made against the King? How do they compare to the abuses of the executive branch of government today? Make your own list and compare them with the charges listed in the Declaration. (See page 119 of *Quest Of A Hemisphere*.)

What action did the colonial leaders take to remedy the injustices? What can we do today?

them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Can you put that idea in your own words? What is the reason for writing the Declaration? [*The answer is that such serious action as breaking away from an established government requires that an explanation be given.*]

Now the second paragraph, which is the most important part of the Declaration, gives the reason for independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident [which means that what is to follow are truths that should be obvious to everyone] that all men are created equal.

Stop and think that through. What is the difference between all men being created equal and all men being equal? [*Encourage discussion about this important point.*] If all men are equal, each would have the same talents, tastes, and ambitions. Therefore, each should receive the same amount of money regardless of the job he has. Being *created* equal is something very different. It has to do with our having equal importance in the sight of God, our Creator. The life of each person is just as sacred as the life of any other; each has exactly the same natural God-given rights.

The next phrase reads: “That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

Again, this goes back to the idea that rights come from God and not from kings or governments or presidents of the United States. These rights are permanent and cannot be taken away, which is what “unalienable” means.

What are these God-given rights that are permanent? The next phrase tells us: “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” What things are not mentioned? [*The right to a ten thousand dollar income, which we have to work to get. The right to a job, which we have to seek. The right to take something that belongs to someone else — even if the government does the taking, calling it “taxes,” and gives it to us, calling it “welfare.”*]

But we do have the right to life — and to have it protected. A king or a president should not be able to order us shot or hanged because we criticize his actions. However, if we deliberately disobey a law for which we know the penalty is death, then our life is no longer protected.

We also have the right to liberty — that is, to lead the

kind of life that we feel will please our Creator — and to pursue happiness. The Declaration doesn’t guarantee or promise us happiness. No one can do that for anyone else. Our God-given right is to be able to work for happiness in the way that we see fit.

The next sentence explains how these God-given rights are protected. It says: “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The entire purpose of having a government of any kind is to protect — not to give or change — our God-given rights.

SUPPOSE WE MOVED to a newly-discovered island in the middle of the Atlantic with other families and began to have differences of opinion as to who owned what land or how to make a land claim or where to build a road and what side of it to drive on. We would need some rules and someone to enforce them that was not on either side of the dispute. We would need a referee. If there were many families living there and many disputes arising, we might consider hiring a fulltime referee which we might call “government.” Since we would be paying this referee or government to do the job we wanted done, it would be our servant. The only power it would have is the power we agreed to give it.

What would we do if the referee we hired, the government, began to do things it was not paid to do? For example: forbid us to drive on the roads or to own land or to freely move about. Suppose it threatened to take our lives if we disagreed with its decrees? [*Encourage ideas from all members. The simple solution would be either to get government back on the right track or hire a new one that would do the job in the right way.*] This is the way the Declaration puts it:

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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Government long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.

It was because the English government was destroying the God-given liberties of the colonists — in fact, it did not even recognize that there were such rights

— and that there was no hope for changing either the King or Parliament (most every means had been tried for more than ten years) that made independence and a new government necessary.

The Declaration then lists the number of ways in which the King had taken away the liberties of the colonists and concludes with these very solemn words: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Would each of you be willing to give your life, all that you have, to support the ideas we have discussed? You might lose a great deal. Many of the men who signed the Declaration did. Next week we’ll talk about what happened to some of them.

Concluding Thought

The most important point to remember is that our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are God-given, not government-given, and that we should never look to government as the giver of rights but as an agency we hire to protect them.

DURING THE WEEK

As a family project, we recommend purchasing a copy of the Declaration of Independence to frame. Surrounding your family with visual reminders of our American heritage reinforces learning. Parchment reproductions of the Declaration are available for less than fifty cents.

Also recommended for purchase is the book, *They Signed For Us* — an outstanding Americanist study by Merle Sinclair and Annabel McArthur which tells more details of the signing of the Declaration and the fate of the signers.

OPENING PARAGRAPHS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

“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.

“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. That to secure these rights, Governments are 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.”

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For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

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