



We Hold These Truths to be Self-Evident

by Paul Aron, from his book *We Hold These Truths...and Other Words that Made America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 91-104.

ON JUNE 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, following the instructions of the Virginia Convention, introduced a resolution at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia "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 connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." The Continental Congress adopted Lee's resolution and then appointed a committee of five—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Thomas Jefferson, and Robert Livingston—to turn the resolution into a declaration of independence. Adams took charge and promptly assigned Jefferson to write a draft.

Jefferson did not want to do it. He watched Lee depart for home and longed to follow him. He was convinced that what was going on in Williamsburg, where the Convention's delegates were drafting a constitution for the newly independent commonwealth, mattered more than what was going on in Philadelphia. Jefferson had even written a draft constitution that he hoped the Convention would adopt. What was the point of independence if you didn't create the right form of government? "Should a bad government be instituted for us in the future," he wrote Thomas Nelson in May 1776, "it had been as well to have accepted at first the bad one offered to us from beyond the water without the risk and expense of contest."

Jefferson suggested Adams should draft the Declaration himself. Adams declined, giving several reasons, which he repeated years later in his autobiography:

1. That he was a Virginian and I a Massachusettian.
2. That he was a southern Man and I a northern one.
3. That I had been so obnoxious for my early and constant zeal in promoting the measure, that any draft of mine, would undergo a more severe scrutiny and criticism in Congress, than one of his composition.

4. 4thly and lastly that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great opinion of the elegance of his pen and none at all of my own.

Adams's arguments, Jefferson had to admit, made sense. Jefferson went to work and, a day or two later, produced a draft of what would become the Declaration of Independence.

How he managed to write, in a matter of a day or two, the words that more than any others made America has been the subject of much debate. Part of the answer is he didn't start from scratch. He had with him in Philadelphia, and he clearly drew from, his own previous writings, including his 1774 *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, his 1775 "Declaration . . . Setting forth the Causes and Necessity of their taking up Arms," and his draft of a constitution for Virginia. He also had others' recent works at hand, most notably a draft of Virginia's Declaration of Rights, which was written by George Mason and adopted with amendments in the Virginia Convention. Mason's declaration opened by stating: "That all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." Jefferson's most famous words were clearly derived from Mason's; in Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration, men were "created equal," they had "rights inherent and inalienable" (which he later changed to "inherent and inalienable rights"), and these rights included "the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (which he later changed to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"). Jefferson also drew from works that he did not have at his side in Philadelphia. He was familiar with the writings of seventeenth-century English writers, including John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and above all John Locke, who set forth a doctrine of natural rights in his *Second Treatise on Government*. He may also have drawn from Scottish philosophers, especially Francis Hutcheson.



Jefferson submitted his draft to Adams and Franklin, who made a few changes, among them that the rights Jefferson had declared to be "sacred and undeniable" were instead "self-evident." The committee then sent the document on to the Congress, which made a total of eighty-six changes. Most involved cutting (about a quarter of Jefferson's text was eliminated), but the Congress also played with Jefferson's language, for example changing "inherent and inalienable rights" to "certain inalienable rights." "Inalienable" later became "unalienable," probably when the Declaration was printed (the latter was more customary in the eighteenth century). Thus the words in their most familiar form: "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."

For Jefferson, seeing his words changed was agonizing, and some others also questioned the results. Richard Henry Lee wrote Jefferson that he wished "that the manuscript had not been mangled as it is." Franklin, Jefferson later recalled, "perceived that I was not insensible to these mutilations" and tried to console him by telling him a story about a hatter who wrote what he considered superb copy for a sign advertising his store, then watched his friends edit it down to simply his name and a picture of a hat. Jefferson's hat, this mangled manuscript, contained words that more than any made America; as Jefferson himself put it in 1824, the Declaration was "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves."

But—with so many sources and so many editors—was the Declaration truly Jefferson's?

Adams, who was admittedly jealous of Jefferson, later wrote that there was "not an idea in it, but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before." Jefferson denied he had copied any other writing: "I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it," he insisted in an 1823 letter to James Madison. Jefferson did not deny, however, that the words of others, past and present, were on his mind. Indeed, it would hardly have been possible to secure Congress's support for independence had Jefferson's words not been, as he put it in an 1825 letter to Henry Lee, "an expression of the American mind." His purpose, he explained to Lee, had been "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent." The Declaration's authority, Jefferson rightly added, "rests . . . on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc."

By the 1820s, when Jefferson rose to defend his authorship, the Declaration was well on its way to becoming the premiere "expression of the American mind." Partly, this was because of partisan politics. When Jefferson emerged as the leader of the Republican Party, his supporters began to celebrate the "deathless instrument" penned by "the immortal Jefferson." Jefferson's opponents in the Federalist Party argued that he wrote only a "small part of that memorable instrument" and that what he did write "he stole from Locke's Essays." After the Federalists faded away and a new party system emerged, both parties claimed to be carrying on Jefferson's legacy, and both embraced the Declaration. Jefferson happily accepted the Declaration's new role. In 1824, when Congress sent him copies of a new facsimile edition, he expressed his pleasure at the evident "reverence for that instrument," which he viewed as "a pledge of adhesion to its principles and of a sacred determination to maintain and perpetuate them."

To later generations of Americans, the most important principle pledged in the Declaration was that of equality. Neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights asserted that all men were created equal. So it made sense that Americans seeking equality, whether workers or women or blacks, would turn to the Declaration. At the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, women declared it "self-evident" that "all men and women are created equal." Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison urged, in 1847, the formation of a new government faithful to "the principles of the Declaration of Independence." At a Fourth of July celebration in 1852, Frederick Douglass asked the crowd: "Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it." Most famously, in his 1863 Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln looked back four score and seven years ago to 1776, the year "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."