On May 26, 1776, John Adams – who represented Massachusetts at the Second Continental Congress – wrote exultantly to his friend James Warren that “every post and every day rolls in upon us independence like a torrent.” Adams had reason for rejoicing, for this was what he and others had hoped and worked for almost since the Congress had convened in May of the previous year. It helped, to be sure, that George III had proclaimed the colonies in rebellion, and this encouraged the Americans to take him at his word. Later, George Washington proceeded to drive General Howe out of Boston. This demonstrated that Americans need not stand on the defensive, but could vindicate themselves in military strategy quite as well as in political.

However exciting to some, America was going through the difficult process of being born. In any event, the stage of history was being set. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced three resolutions calling for independence, foreign alliances, and confederation. Some wanted unity and voted to postpone the final vote for three weeks. This allowed time for debate and for the hesitant and fainthearted to come over or step out. In the meantime, Congress appointed a committee to prepare a “Declaration of Independence.” This committee consisted of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson had come to the Continental Congress the previous year, bringing with him a reputation for literature, science, and a talent for composition. His writings, said John Adams, “were remarkable for their peculiar felicity of expression.” In part because of his rhetorical gifts, in part because he already had a reputation for working quickly, in part because it was thought that Virginia – as the oldest, the largest, and the most deeply committed of the states – should take the lead, the committee unanimously turned to Jefferson to prepare a draft declaration.

We know a great deal about the composition of that draft. Jefferson wrote it standing at his desk (still preserved) in the second-floor parlor of a young German bricklayer named Graff, and he completed it in two weeks. We have his word for it that he “turned neither to book nor pamphlet” and that all the authority of the Declaration “rests on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” We can accept Jefferson’s statement made 50 years later that the object of the Declaration was to be “an appeal to the tribunal of the

world" – that "decent respect to the opinions of Mankind" invoked in the Declaration itself. However, in Jefferson's words (as he wrote to James Madison in 1823), it certainly was "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, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an *expression of the American mind*
, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion."

The Declaration of Independence, then, was an expression of the American mind that was prevalent in the colonies of that time. As Jefferson stated, the Declaration contained no new ideas, nor was there any originality in it on his part. He merely articulated what people of that day were thinking.

The basic elements of the American mind are set forth in the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration opens by stating: "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 opening paragraph of the Declaration states that the colonists are impelled or required to separate from Great Britain for certain reasons: "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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."

This preamble sums up with lucidity, logic, and eloquence the philosophy which presided over the argument for the American Revolution, the creation of a new political system, and the vindication of the rights of man – all in less than two hundred words. Here we find expressed what is universal rather than parochial, what is permanent rather than transient, in the American Revolution. Where most of the body of the Declaration is retrospective, the preamble is prospective. In the years to come, it would be translated into the basic institutions of the American republic.

Consider the opening words of the Declaration: “When, in the Course of human events ... .” That places it, and the Revolution, at once in the appropriate setting, against the backdrop of not merely American or British but universal history. That connects it with the experience of people everywhere – not only at a moment in history, but in every era. This concept of the place of American history is underlined by successive phrases of the opening sentence. It points to a future of hope and optimism.

Thus, the new nation is to assume its place “among the powers of the earth.” It is not the laws of the British empire, or even of history, but of “Nature and of Nature’s God” that entitled Americans to an equal station. Moreover, it is “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” that requires this justification. No other political document of the 18th Century proclaims so broad a purpose. No political document of our own day associates the United States so boldly with universal history in the cosmic system.

The American mind of the colonial period did not acknowledge a different order of truth, one for the lofty realms of mathematics, another for the more earthbound regions, and still another for society, politics, and the economy. While clearly discernible in the natural world, the cause of “Nature and of Nature’s God” applied equally to the world of politics and to the law. Benjamin Franklin, as a young man, said: “How exact and regular is everything in the *natural* World! How wisely in every part contriv’d. We cannot here find the least Defect. Those who have studied the mere animal and vegetable Creation demonstrate that nothing can be more harmonious and beautiful! All the heavenly bodies, the Stars and Planets, are regulated with the utmost Wisdom! And can we suppose less care to be taken in the Order of the Moral than in the natural System?”

From such a God-ordered system, certain truths are self-evident. To Jefferson, these self-evident truths formed a total reality. He listed seven of them:

(1) That all men are created equal;

(2) That human beings are endowed by their Creator with “unalienable” rights;

(3) That these rights include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;

(4) That it is to secure these rights that government is instituted among men;

(5) That governments are instituted to derive their powers from the consent of the governed;

(6) That when a form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it becomes illegitimate and a citizenry may alter or abolish it; and,

(7) That people have the right, then, to institute new governments designed to effect their safety and happiness.

Jefferson drew from many different sources to effectuate the principles that are enunciated in the Declaration and that have become embodied in the modern concept of the rights of people. As historian Henry Steele Commager writes: “What Americans did was more important than invent new principles; in the telling phrase of John Adams, ‘they *realized* the theories of the wisest writers.’ They actualized them, they legalized them, they institutionalized them. That was, and remains, the supreme achievement of the American Revolution, indeed, in the longer perspective, that *was* and *is* the American Revolution.”

Men speak not only in verbal language but also in the language of history – in the context and meaning of their time and place. It was the language of American colonial history which was written into the Declaration of Independence and other documents that were to follow. These

drew upon not only the European and classical sources so often cited by the shapers of American history, John Locke and Baron de Montesquieu, but also Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Hobbes, Burlamaqui, John Milton, Hooker, David Hume, Bolingbroke, William Blackstone, Burke, Shaftesbury, and a score of collateral branches. As author James Burnham notes: “But the Fathers were the masters, not the victims, of these inherited ideas, and sometimes it is the rhetoric more than the ideas that is taken over. The Fathers were protected from ideology not only by piety and a native skepticism toward abstract reason, but by their persistent sense of fact, of the specific.”

The language of “Reason” and “Nature” had a long philosophical and legal history and was by no means the exclusive property of the Enlightenment writers. For example, in 1644, the Scottish educator Samuel Rutherford in *Lex Rex*, cited Aristotle and Aquinas and appealed to “God and Nature.”

Moreover, many men use words that to others imply a religious view not held by the speaker or writer without an awareness either of the divergence of meaning or the mixed presuppositions. Witness, for example, Reverend John Witherspoon, an influential Presbyterian leader who in 1768 assumed the presidency of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). An orthodox Calvinist, Witherspoon, without any sense of contradiction, spoke in the language of rights and reason, combining it with his Christianity.

In spite of this pragmatic usage, there was, however, an element of philosophical indistinction that must be recognized. The epistemological awareness developed over the past two centuries cannot be read back into the colonial period; nor, on the other hand, can modern secularism be so read into the philosophy of the Declaration of Independence. To speak therefore of an “American Enlightenment” is to attempt to read into the Revolution later developments in American thought.

Ideas beget progeny that soon outstrip the narrow concepts of their creator. This is, in a special degree, true of the philosophy of the American colonists.

A concept of both the Declaration of Independence and the American mind is that all men are created equal. This phrase was developed and written in a time when the American colonies labored under the enigma and curse of the slavery of African Americans.

America in 1776 as well as in 1787 (the time of the drafting of the Constitution) was a slave state in apparent contradiction of what many of the framers proclaimed. The same Thomas Jefferson who, for instance, could rhetorically claim that “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence possessed, at that time, black slaves. “How is it,” Dr. Samuel Johnson mused, “that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?”

In fairness to Jefferson, it must be noted that he did provide an antislavery section in an initial draft of the Declaration of Independence. Unfortunately, this section was later removed by Congress, against the protests of Jefferson. In his early years, Jefferson authored also a bevy of antislavery legislation, most of which never came to fruition. And Jefferson’s anti-slavery ideas had an immense impact on Abraham Lincoln. As Lincoln said: “I am sustained by Mr. Jefferson.”

Of course, there will always be contradictions wherever men and women exist. This was true of the American colonists. They were not perfect men and women. This is the plight of human beings. However, that does not invalidate the concepts enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. Stated in the Declaration of Independence, and as they became part of the American culture, the concepts and ideas take on a universal meaning. In essence, the ideas have escaped from the pages of the document and have entered the flow of cosmic history.

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