

The Washington Post

4th of July thoughts on the Declaration of Independence, slavery, and T. Jefferson

David Post

July 4, 2016

While we're celebrating, as well we should, the remarkable words of the Declaration of Independence and the ideas that stand behind them, I can't resist adding one additional point that often goes unremarked in connection with the Declaration. As co-blogger Randy Barnett points out [here](#), not only did Jefferson crib much of the great two-paragraph Preamble from other sources, he freely admitted having done so:

“I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether, [or] to offer sentiment which had never been expressed before. . . . [T]he object of the Declaration of Independence [was] not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, [or] 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. [Not] aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, . . . 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. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day . . .”

But Jefferson's formulation was hardly just a compression or summary of the conventional “sentiments of the day.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable 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 . . .”

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Not, notice, the more conventional “life, liberty, and property.” Congress' 1774 Declaration of Rights – one of the documents on hand as Jefferson was drafting his Declaration – used the more conventional formulation:

“The inhabitants of the English colonies in North-America, by the immutable laws of nature . . . have the following RIGHTS: That they are entitled to life, liberty, and property . . .”

So, too, George Mason's draft of a "Virginia Declaration of Rights," another of the primary sources that Jefferson relied heavily upon, had it this way:

"All men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, . . . namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property . . ."

Jefferson's omission and re-formulation was intentional, and everyone current in the intellectual debates of the 1760s and 70 understood what was at stake. It fatally weakened the slave-owners claim that the institution of slavery rested on *their* natural and inalienable right to possess property, a right of equal weight, in the natural order of things, to the slaves' rights to life and liberty. It exposed the lie for all to see – the idea the owning other human beings could somehow comport with the new nation's principle of equality.

If one had to pick a single date on which the long, slow decline of slavery in this country begins, you would do worse than July 4, 1776, and I don't think Jefferson gets enough credit for this. Some years ago, at a 4th of July conference at Middlebury College, I said:

Tragically, for Jefferson and for his slaves, the mere declaration of the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal" did not, in and of itself, make them free; history doesn't usually, and it didn't in this case, work like that. Words are not self-executing.

But they do, sometimes, have consequences. I repeat the claim I made at the outset of this talk: few people in human history did more, in the sum total of their lifetimes, to dismantle the institution of slavery than Jefferson. The principle of equality laid down in the Declaration of Independence – what Gordon Wood has called "the most powerful proposition in American history, bar none" – set in motion a chain of events that would lead, in as straight a line as history ever gives us, to emancipation.

Nobody understood this (or explained it) better than Lincoln, and he should have the last word(s). We must "repulse," he wrote in 1859, those who would "insidiously argue" that the words of the Declaration of Independence were just "glittering generalities," or, worse, "self evident lies'," for those people are the "vanguard of returning despotism."

The Declaration "gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time, . . . promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of *all* men, and that *all* should have an equal chance." The cause of American progress and American greatness was not the Constitution or the Union, but "something back of these, something entwining itself more closely about the human heart: the principle of 'Liberty to All.'"

He continued:

“All honor to Jefferson – to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression. He supposed there was a question of God’s eternal justice wrapped up in the enslaving of any race of men, or any man, and that those who did so braved the arm of Jehovah – that when a nation thus dared the Almighty every friend of that nation had cause to dread His wrath.”

Taking his cue from the 25th chapter of the Book of Proverbs – “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” – Lincoln concluded:

The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word ‘fitly spoken’ which has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple – not the apple for the picture. So let us act, that neither picture, or apple, shall ever be blurred, or bruised, or broken.”

Happy 4th of July!

David Post is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute