

# Michigan Law Review

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Volume 77 | Issue 3

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1979

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### Recommended Citation

Gerald F. Moran, *The Declaration of Independence: The Reality Behind the Myth*, 77 MICH. L. REV. 806 (1979).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol77/iss3/33>

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## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: THE REALITY BEHIND THE MYTH

Gerald F. Moran\*

INVENTING AMERICA: JEFFERSON'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. By Garry Wills. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1978. Pp. xxvi, 398. \$10.00.

The Declaration of Independence exerts a considerable, if often imperceptible, influence over our civil and political culture, as does the history that brought it to life. Political actions are often undertaken in defense of its governing principles, it frequently sets the tone of civic oratory and rhetoric, and it often guides this country's perceptions of itself. The Declaration's power resides in its evocative preamble and in the drama of founding fathers bringing forth a unique republican nation dedicated to certain laudable values and universal ideals. All the ceremony and celebration of a Fourth of July testify to the centrality of this drama in our national life.

But the Declaration of Independence, as we know and use it today, is largely symbolic, for it conveys meanings to us beyond those intended in 1776, and it also evokes ideals and images that few eighteenth-century men and women employed. Different generations tended to read their own special history and philosophy into it, so that layer upon layer of myth now encase it. We urgently need studies devoted to resurrecting the meaning of the Declaration in light of its precise historical context, otherwise we will continue to misapprehend the myths of our political culture, misunderstand the disjunction between national symbol and national history, and misread the history that produced such important documents as the American Constitution.

*Inventing America* is one such study. Written by a well-known journalist, adjunct professor of humanities at Johns Hopkins University, and author of several well-known books, including *Nixon Agonistes* and *Bare Ruined Choirs*, it sets out to expose the myth and the reality behind the Declaration and its history. Consider, for example, the pervasive belief that Congress accepted and signed the Declaration on July 4, 1776, thus initiating the American Revolution. Actually, the Continental Congress for-

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mally announced its separation from England on July 2, when it approved Richard Henry Lee's resolution for independence, and then it went about the more pressing business of negotiating a treaty with France, devising articles of unification, and conducting a war. Delegates to Congress began signing a formal Declaration on August 2, in commemoration and explanation of actions already undertaken, and quickly forgot about it. Not until many years later, really after the War of 1812, did Americans turn to the Declaration and a mythical July Fourth signing as somehow bringing forth a new republican nation.

When they did, they struck upon the preamble and its principles, paying little heed to the great bulk of the document, the list of grievances against George III. The grievances were tied to a forgotten history, the preamble was not. It contained ideals which could be applied in different ways to different historical circumstances, and during the nineteenth century it began to take on a life of its own, shaping events and being shaped by them. In November 1863, Abraham Lincoln produced one of many enduring interpretations of the preamble and its history. "Four score and seven years ago," he proclaimed at Gettysburg, "our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The war the North was engaged in would test "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." Men had died in battle so that "that nation might live." We should "highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Here, as elsewhere, according to Garry Wills, history became myth. Lincoln had proposed that in 1776 men who were united in purpose had created a union of lasting value and significance. In fact, the delegates at Philadelphia, who first convened as a Congress in September 1774, were men with little sense of nation but with strong provincial loyalties, men of "competing interests and cultures" who were able nevertheless to agree on a tactic to seek redress of grievances committed by England. They decided to use the petition (and not the courts, which were limited to breeches of statute or positive law) to address the British government on its violations against "fundamental law," and once they defined what that law was, they struggled to create a joint list of legitimate complaints out of thirteen separate and often antagonistic ones. Most of the delegates agreed on principles. "The differ-

ences arose over application of 'fundamental law' to particular acts, listed one by one, as part of a system at odds with the whole ethos of the British constitution" (p. 64). When England ignored the petitions of 1774 and 1775, Congress felt compelled to undertake a revolution, (by its view, a reasoned defense of the colonists' rights as Englishmen) and to declare that legal pleas had failed to thwart the perverse acts of a tyrannical monarch. Independence was the logical result of the failure of the petition, while the Declaration itself, as passed by Congress, was the expression of a consensus on certain constitutional grievances which together justified revolution.

This Declaration, Wills argues, is political, while our Declaration is symbolic, and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration, which Congress altered severely, is philosophical. The differences between each of these three versions "have been both underrated and misstated" (p. ix). What of Jefferson's text? This question, which is crucial to an understanding of the differences, is the central concern of *Inventing America*. What did Jefferson mean by what he said? "To understand any text remote from us in time, we must reassemble a world around that text. The preconceptions of the original audience, its tastes, its range of reference, must be recovered, so far as that is possible. We must forget what was learned, or what occurred, in the interval between our time and the text's. We must resurrect beliefs now discarded" (p. 259). This is Wills's strategy. To understand truly Jefferson's draft of the Declaration, the one he wrote at the behest of a congressional committee in June 1776, it is necessary to reconstruct his lost intellectual world and the philosophy to which he adhered.

Wills consciously adopts a Jeffersonian style in his pursuit of precision and clarity. The Virginia planter, like the preamble he wrote, is often considered idealistic and visionary. But, as Wills contends, he was an empiricist, not an idealist. Mathematics and statistics fascinated him, and he sought, among other things, a political science of numbers to measure public happiness. He avoided the metaphysical for the observable, disliked theory and generalization, and felt that ideas should be grounded upon reality. As it changed, so should the ideas it aroused. And as each generation underwent new experiences, it would discover new laws.

But Jefferson, if guided by experience, was also attached primarily to sentiment and the emotional in man. He considered the Head inferior to the Heart. The Head could only reflect passively upon means to ends, upon technique and strategy, while

the Heart, the domain of duty, morality, and virtue, was "a principle of action," the higher faculty that determined ends and motives. Wills, unlike many other scholars, contends that Jefferson actually made the Heart win out over the Head in his famous letter of 1786 to Maria Cosway. Jefferson, the scientist and mathematician, was somehow a devotee of the sentimental in man; he, like Voltaire, advocated a religion of the Heart.

Take, for example, one of the several passages Congress excised from his Declaration, a passage of over three-hundred words. Intended as the climax to his text, it bristled with emotion as Jefferson went beyond ministry, Parliament, and King to attack the "British brethren" for allowing the English government to exercise a corrupt and damaging rule over America. By closing ears to just complaints, by failing to remove British rulers, "the disturbers of our harmony," from power, and by permitting George III to invade the colonies with mercenaries, they had "given the last stab to agonizing affection," and thus, he proclaimed, "manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren." Americans must now "endeavor to forget our former love for them," he continued, "and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness & to glory is open to us too. We will tread it apart from them, and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our eternal separation" (p. 378).

When it eliminated these passages, and also those on slavery, Congress altered profoundly the real meaning of Jefferson's Declaration, leaving "one people" and "political bands" as isolated traces of its original, overarching design. Congress saw the Declaration as "a propaganda overture, addressed primarily to France, which the treaty was meant to follow" (p. 333), but Jefferson had had something different in mind. Although he had managed to voice the common sentiment on grievances, he had let slip, when unhampered by practical and political considerations, some uncommon personal observations, which Congress later scratched.

Where most Americans felt that the King was the last link between them and England, and independence was a matter of severing ties with him, Jefferson believed otherwise. His "declaration of independence," Wills indicates, "is a renunciation of unfeeling brethren. His whole document was shaped to make that clear" (p. 319). His "political bands" of empire did not rest upon submission, sovereignty, or the power of rulers over

ruled, but rather upon brotherhood, respect, and trust, upon affections and sentiments that made any people "one." A society or political community could not exist without mutual benevolence, nor could compacts promote sociability where none prevailed. Independence signalled the creation of a new community of people who were still capable of acting and feeling in consort.

Jefferson allowed his Heart to rule his Head when forced to explain English actions and their possible consequences for Americans. He and other colonists not only employed legal principles in defense of their rights as Englishmen, but also used such terms as "corruption," "power," "conspiracy," "virtue," and "liberty" in political discourse which was often animated and bombastic. These notions, according to recent studies, were part and parcel of a republican world view, a Revolutionary ideology that was shaped by the colonists' highly selective reading and by their special situation—their remoteness from the locus of sovereignty, for example. They tended to overreact to any unconstitutional act, however slight, because they believed that corruption could easily permeate a system and lead officials to conspire for power at the expense of public liberty. During the imperial crisis, and when the old order was beginning to dissolve, many Americans sought to promote virtue, patriotism, or the common good in defense of liberty against corrupt, power-hungry Englishmen.

This republican ideology had very little to do with John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, as scholars have recently shown. Nor did the *Two Treatises* inform Jefferson's philosophy at the time he wrote the Declaration of Independence, as Carl Becker once maintained. Jefferson was not a Lockean individualist who believed in a social compact based on property rights. Moreover, Wills says, he "was opposed to the individualist vision of private enterprise" (p. 366). His communitarian value system did not square with the nineteenth century's reading of John Locke.

Rather, he was devoted to the Scottish Enlightenment and its moral-sense philosophy. Such men as David Hume, Thomas Reid, William Small (his tutor at William and Mary), and Francis Hutcheson (whose writings he especially valued), guided him when he wrote phrases like "the pursuit of happiness" and "all men are created equal," phrases that today seem abstract and visionary. When Jefferson substituted "pursuit of happiness" for Locke's "property" in the pantheon of inalienable rights, he intended to say that unless men were allowed to follow their instincts for the natural good, the body politic would flounder. Be-

cause moral sense enabled men to take pleasure in benevolent acts and to perceive mutual benevolence as the highest good, they were capable of transcending the self and working for the well-being of all people. The free pursuit of public happiness was, for Jefferson, the backbone of any free society, state, or government.

Like "pursuit of happiness," "all men are created equal" has confounded historians who have failed to read the Declaration in light of moral-sense philosophy. Jefferson felt that all men were equal, not necessarily before God or the law, or in the free marketplace, but because they were endowed with the same Heart. Inequalities in sentiment existed only because of inadequate education and nurture. At the basis of his whole political creed was "the belief that all men possess an equal and automatically functioning moral sense, to serve as the ground for rights and self-rule" (p. 285).

According to Wills, Scottish philosophy also held sway over Jefferson's thinking on slavery. Blacks, he believed, were born with the same instincts and sentiments, the same Heart, as whites, but slavery crippled their moral-sense faculties. He suggested that all slaves born after a certain date be educated apart from their parents, and then, when they became adults, be deported at Virginia's expense to another territory, where they could pursue their instincts and live in freedom and happiness. Individual manumission, on the other hand, would lead only to race war and genocide, for how could the oppressed be expected to unite peacefully with the oppressor? Society, like government, functioned best when people had similar interests and shared a common ethos; without mutual benevolence, people would divide into parties and internal warfare would ensue. For the same reasons he opposed the continued migration of whites into Virginia, American ties to a decadent Europe, and the continued union of colonists with their unfeeling brethren, he objected to individual emancipation as inimical to social homogeneity, fraternity, and peace.

Of course, a plantation culture was also at stake here. Did paternalism and economic self-interest enter into Jefferson's thinking on slavery? If so, how? Wills does not say. He maintains that Jefferson was thoroughly consistent in his philosophy and in his views on such matters as slavery, but he fails to demonstrate that plantation exigencies *did not* interfere with his imported ideas. Because Wills relies heavily upon textual parallels and thematic echoes to expose an ideational network, he risks overlooking possible ambiguities and contradictions resulting

from tensions between ideals and experience. With all his understanding of Scottish philosophy, he would have done well to have shown us where Jefferson's ethos either resisted or absorbed the culture of the plantation and the interests of the slaveholder.

Wills also argues that Jefferson was equally consistent in political principle and that neither he nor many other men of his generation, shifted strategy from 1776 to 1787, when the Constitution was formulated. No contradictions, Wills says, existed between the convention of 1787 and Revolutionary ideals, for the same men supported both movements and adhered to the same ideas, including a theory of social counterpoise which flowed into federalism. Much of this is true. But what should we make of the presidency, among other constitutional innovations? The men who created a powerful government in 1787, one that rode roughshod over the states, had the problems of post-war America in mind, not those of the Revolution. During the 1780s Americans turned inward to resolve domestic issues, and old words tended to acquire new meanings. Where "power" had once expressed concern for executive tyranny, it now conveyed anxieties about legislative oppression. Where liberty had been considered in public terms, it now was interpreted more privately by some people who sought to protect property and creditors' rights and to facilitate commerce. Where "virtue" had once been used to gauge the extent of English corruption, it now conveyed anxieties about American morality and the country's ability to survive as a republic, so brittle had republics proved to be in the past. The Constitution combined both the old and the new, both the locale and the nation, for example.

I doubt whether the colonists could have achieved any common intellectual front within Wills's America of disparate communities and cultures, where each province maintained closer ties with England than with one another and where a bewildering variety of regions and social groupings existed. Certainly no sense of nation could have prevailed before 1776. Or could it have? More and more after the mid-eighteenth-century colonial elites travelled to England and there rubbed shoulders with other colonists who were likewise pursuing an education, promoting political causes, and arranging business alliances. Newspapers in America also proliferated after the 1740s, thus promoting communication, and contacts among merchants increased as trade escalated. The imperial crisis brought together many lawyers, merchants, and planters in intercolonial assemblies, where they worked out a united resistance to England and created a common



wartime strategy. These men developed a precocious sense of nation even before 1776, and after then they became increasingly committed to the idea of a central government. At the same time, provincial and local loyalties prevailed among many groups of people, some of whom were to be found in the back country. Their particularistic attitudes cropped up in resistance to the Constitution.

Despite some of its oversights, *Inventing America* is an important and exciting work, one which should be read for what it says about the history behind our national myths. Wills exposes a significant source of Revolutionary ideas. He shows the importance of placing texts in their historical context and of approaching such terms as democracy, liberty, equality, and rights only with reference to their original meaning and shifting cultural and historical milieu. He enters a necessary warning against projecting the nineteenth-century mystique of the self-made man into earlier eras, especially the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He, like other recent historians, demonstrates that historical precedents do exist for considering American society and politics in terms of the family and the community, not the individual. Too few of us today have been willing to concede that we live in a pluralistic society of subcommunities and subcultures, not an unwieldy composite of isolated, competing individuals. *Inventing America* should excite further attempts to uncover the real meaning of 1776.