

The Declaration of Independence in Global Perspective

by David Armitage

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No American document has had a greater global impact than the Declaration of Independence. It has been fundamental to American history longer than any other text because it was the first to use the name “the United States of America”: in this sense, the Declaration was the birth certificate of the American nation. It enshrined what came to be seen as the most succinct and memorable statement of the ideals on which that nation was founded: the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; the consent of the governed; and resistance to tyranny. And, as the first successful declaration of independence in world history, its example helped to inspire countless movements for independence, self-determination, and revolution after 1776. One of its most enthusiastic admirers was the nineteenth-century Hungarian nationalist, Lajos Kossuth: for him, the Declaration was nothing less than “the noblest, happiest page in mankind’s history.”

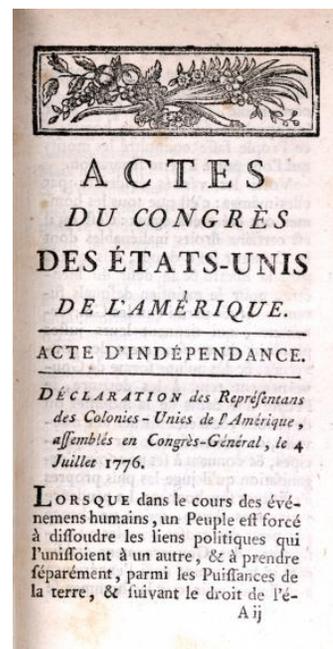
The Declaration was addressed as much to “mankind” as it was to the population of the colonies. In the opening paragraph, the authors of the Declaration—Thomas Jefferson, the five-member Congressional committee of which he was part, and the Second Continental Congress itself—addressed “the opinions of Mankind” as they announced the necessity 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. . . .

After stating the fundamental principles—the “self-evident” truths—that justified separation, they submitted an extensive list of facts to “a candid world” to prove that George III had acted tyrannically. On the basis of those facts, his colonial subjects could now rightfully leave the British Empire. The Declaration therefore “solemnly Publish[ed] and Declare[d], That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES” and concluded with a statement of the rights of such states that was similar to the enumeration of individual rights in the Declaration’s second paragraph in being both precise and open-ended:

... that as FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which INDEPENDENT STATES may of right do.

This was what the Declaration declared to the colonists who could now become citizens rather than subjects, and to the powers of the earth who were being asked to choose whether or not to acknowledge the United States of America among their number.



A French translation of the Declaration of Independence from Recueil des loix constitutives des colonies, published in Philadelphia in 1778 and sold in Paris. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The final paragraph of the Declaration announced that the United States of America were now available for alliances and open for business. The colonists needed military, diplomatic, and commercial help in their revolutionary struggle against Great Britain; only a major power, like France or Spain, could supply that aid. Thomas Paine had warned in *Common Sense* in January 1776 that “the custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until by an independence, we take rank with other nations.” So long as the colonists remained within the empire, they would be treated as rebels; if they organized themselves into political bodies with which other powers could engage, then they might become legitimate belligerents in an international conflict rather than treasonous combatants within a British civil war.

The Declaration of Independence was primarily a declaration of *interdependence* with the other powers of the earth. It marked the entry of one people, constituted into thirteen states, into what we would now call international society. It did so in the conventional language of the contemporary law of nations drawn from the hugely influential book of that title (1758) by the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel, a copy of which Benjamin Franklin had sent to Congress in 1775. Vattel’s was a language of rights and freedom, sovereignty and independence, and the Declaration’s use of his terms was designed to reassure the world beyond North America that the United States would abide by the rules of international behavior. The goal of the Declaration’s authors was still quite revolutionary: to extend the sphere of European international relations across the Atlantic Ocean by turning dependent colonies into independent political actors. The historical odds were greatly against them; as they knew well, no people had managed to secede from an empire since the United Provinces had revolted from Spain almost two centuries before, and no overseas colony had done so in modern times.

The other powers of the earth were naturally curious about what the Declaration said. By August 1776, news of American independence and copies of the Declaration itself had reached London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, as well as the Dutch Republic and Austria. By the fall of that year, Danish, Italian, Swiss, and Polish readers had heard the news and many could now read the Declaration in their own language as translations appeared across Europe. The document inspired diplomatic debate in France but that potential ally only began serious negotiations after the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777. The Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce of February 1778 was the first formal recognition of the United States as “free and independent states.” French assistance would, of course, be crucial to the success of the American cause. It also turned the American war into a global conflict involving Britain, France, Spain, and the Dutch Republic in military operations around the globe that would shape the fate of empires in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean worlds.

The ultimate success of American independence was swiftly acknowledged to be of world-historical significance. “A great revolution has happened—a revolution made, not by chopping and changing of power in any one of the existing states, but by the appearance of a new state, of a new species, in a new part of the globe,” wrote the British politician Edmund Burke. With Sir William Herschel’s recent discovery of the ninth planet, Uranus, in mind, he continued: “It has made as great a change in all the relations, and balances, and gravitation of power, as the appearance of a new planet would in the system of the solar world.” However, it is a striking historical irony that the Declaration itself almost immediately sank into oblivion, “old *wadding* left to rot on the *battle-field* after the victory is won,” as Abraham Lincoln put it in 1857. The Fourth of July was widely celebrated but not the Declaration itself. Even in the infant United States, the Declaration was largely forgotten until the early 1790s, when it re-emerged as a bone of political contention in the partisan struggles between pro-British Federalists and pro-French Republicans after the French Revolution. Only after the War of 1812 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, did it become revered as the foundation of a newly emergent American patriotism.

Imitations of the Declaration were also slow in coming. Within North America, there was only one other early declaration of independence—Vermont’s, in January 1777—and no similar document appeared

outside North America until after the French Revolution. In January 1790, the Austrian province of Flanders expressed a desire to become a free and independent state in a document whose concluding lines drew directly on a French translation of the American Declaration. The allegedly self-evident truths of the Declaration's second paragraph did not appear in this Flemish manifesto nor would they in most of the 120 or so declarations of independence issued around the world in the following two centuries. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen would have greater global impact as a charter of individual rights. The sovereignty of states, as laid out in the opening and closing paragraphs of the American Declaration, was the main message other peoples beyond America heard in the document after 1776.

More than half of the 192 countries now represented at the United Nations have a founding document that can be called a declaration of independence. Most of those countries came into being from the wreckage of empires or confederations, from Spanish America in the 1810s and 1820s to the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Their declarations of independence, like the American Declaration, informed the world that one people or state was now asserting—or, in many cases in the second half of the twentieth century re-asserting—its sovereignty and independence. Many looked back directly to the American Declaration for inspiration. For example, in 1811, Venezuela's representatives declared "that these united Provinces are, and ought to be, from this day, by act and right, Free, Sovereign, and Independent States." The Texas declaration of independence (1836) likewise followed the American in listing grievances and claiming freedom and independence. In the twentieth century, nationalists in Central Europe and Korea after the First World War staked their claims to sovereignty by going to Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Even the white minority government of Southern Rhodesia in 1965 made their unilateral declaration of independence from the British Parliament by adopting the form of the 1776 Declaration, though they ended it with a royalist salutation: "God Save the Queen!" The international community did not recognize that declaration because, unlike many similar pronouncements made during the process of decolonization by other African countries, it did not speak on behalf of all the people of their country.

Invocations of the American Declaration's second paragraph in later declarations of independence are conspicuous by their scarcity. Among the few are those of Liberia (1847) and Vietnam (1945). The Liberian declaration of independence recognized "in all men, certain natural and inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, and enjoy property": a significant amendment to the original Declaration's right to happiness by the former slaves who had settled Liberia under the aegis of the American Colonization Society. Almost a century later, in September 1945, the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh opened his declaration of independence with the "immortal statement" from the 1776 Declaration: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." However, Ho immediately updated those words: "In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples of the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free." It would be hard to find a more concise summary of the message of the Declaration for the post-colonial predicaments of the late twentieth century.

The global history of the Declaration of Independence is a story of the spread of sovereignty and the creation of states more than it is a narrative of the diffusion and reception of ideas of individual rights. The farflung fortunes of the Declaration remind us that independence and popular sovereignty usually accompanied each other, but also that there was no necessary connection between them: an independent Mexico became an empire under a monarchy between 1821 and 1823, Brazil's independence was proclaimed by its emperor, Dom Pedro II in 1822, and, as we have seen, Ian Smith's Rhodesian government threw off parliamentary authority while professing loyalty to the British Crown. How to protect universal human rights in a world of sovereign states, each of which jealously guards itself from

interference by outside authorities, remains one of the most pressing dilemmas in contemporary politics around the world.

So long as a people comes to believe their rights have been assaulted in a “long Train of Abuses and Usurpations,” they will seek to protect those rights by forming their own state, for which international custom demands a declaration of independence. In February 2008, the majority Albanian population of Kosovo declared their independence of Serbia in a document designed to reassure the world that their cause offered no precedent for any similar separatist or secessionist movements. Fewer than half of the current powers of the earth have so far recognized this Kosovar declaration. The remaining countries, among them Russia, China, Spain, and Greece, have resisted for fear of encouraging the break-up of their own territories. The explosive potential of the American Declaration was hardly evident in 1776 but a global perspective reveals its revolutionary force in the centuries that followed. Thomas Jefferson’s assessment of its potential, made weeks before his death on July 4, 1826, surely still holds true today: “an instrument, pregnant with our own and the fate of the world.”

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