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The Declaration of Independence



HONORABLE HENRY B. F. MACFARLAND





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STATUE OF WASHINGTON,
The Gift of the Women of America to France.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE



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THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.*

“THE Declaration of Independence is as much alive to-day as when it was born one hundred and twenty-four years ago. It is immortal. Its vitality is attested by the fresh interest in it during the past year when it has been more discussed in Congress and in the press than in any former year. Although it is the Bible of our politics, enshrined in the hearts of our people and beyond criticism, beyond eulogy, it is, like the Bible of our religion, subject to interpretation. No political sect can claim it as exclusively its own, all political sects may claim an equal title to it. As on this Independence Day we rise to an independence of political parties, rise from being Republicans or Democrats to be Americans, so we may assert amid our conflicting opinions about the Declaration of Independence, that it is our common possession, our common source of inspiration. No individual or set of individuals can monopolize either the immortal Declaration or the American flag, but there is enough of both for us all. Expansionist or anti-expansionist, strict constructionist or liberal constructionist, whatever we may be called, we are one in our admiration and veneration for this great paper issued by a Congress unexcelled, as Lord Chatham said, ‘in solidity of reasoning, force of sagacity and wisdom of conclusion.’ No one now reads Magna Charta. It is only a name to round a period. No one but lawyers and students reads the Constitution of the United States, but we all read the Declaration of Independence at least once a year, and its striking passages are household words. None of us look at the original in the safe at the library of the State Department without a thrill of exaltation.

“Yet we may and do honestly differ about it. Is it poetry? Is it prose? The senior senator from the State of Massachu-

* Oration of Hon. Henry B. F. Macfarland delivered before the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, Washington, D. C., July 4, 1900.

setts, where Samuel Adams began the agitation for a declaration of independence, takes one view of it in his great speech on the Philippine question, the junior senator from that same commonwealth in his great speech on the Philippine question takes another view of it. Are those famous declarations in the Declaration only the 'glittering generalities' that Rufus Choate said they were, or are they very truth of very truth and to be taken literally? In this case does the letter kill while the spirit makes alive? These and like questions run through the high debate over this great document. I like to think that it is both poetry and prose, according to the genius of our race. We are at once the most sentimental and the most practical people on earth. Our story as a nation, the most marvelous in all history, is poetry and prose interwoven. It could not be written otherwise. And in spite of the manifold material changes of this century, the opening of the mechanical age, the Declaration of Independence still represents fully our national life.

"'I could not write my poem and so I lived it,' said Thoreau. This might well have been said by the stern poets of action who published the Declaration of Independence to the world. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston—the committee of Congress to prepare the document—these are men of prose, you say, lawyers, statesmen, men of affairs, standing solidly on the ground and looking at men and not at stars.

"They, and the men whom they represented, went about this matter in the old-fashioned, practical, cautious way of our race. They made no declaration of independence until all the world knew that the colonies were, in fact, independent, if not free. It was a record of what had been accomplished, not an announcement of what was desired. More than a year had elapsed since the 'embattled farmers' of Lexington and Concord 'fired the shot heard 'round the world.' It was more than a year since the American militia at Bunker Hill won a moral victory over the British regulars. It was more than a year since George Washington took com-

mand of an army which in itself was an evidence of independence.

“The thirteen colonies were governing themselves individually, and as a federation, in practical separation from the British Government, and the British army was vainly endeavoring to coerce them into subjection before they were willing to put it all down in black and white. Nothing is plainer now, as we study the letters and speeches of the leaders of the Revolution, than that they were reluctant to press for independence, and that Samuel Adams was the only one who desired it from an early period in the struggle, while the majority of the people of the colonies were more faithfully represented by a strong minority of the leaders who opposed it to the last.

“The idea we got from our school histories, as children, that ‘the unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America’ was literally the unanimous declaration of the people of those States, or even of their leaders, we know now was mythical, but even Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, the leadership of Washington and the incessant endeavors of Jefferson and the Adamses overcame with difficulty the opposition to separation from Great Britain. It is safe to say, according to the latest and best historians, that if the people had been polled on the question, the majority would have voted against independence, and that this would have been true whether the voting was done by the limited number then entitled to vote or whether all the adult population took part. As a matter of fact, of course, the Continental Congress, which was the Government of the Revolution, derived its just powers from the consent of the governed without any formal ascertainment of the wishes of the governed, and, as Judge Story shows in his ‘Commentaries on the Constitution,’ the wishes of the majority of the governed were not regarded.

“It is difficult for us to realize how unpopular the idea of separation from Great Britain was. Listen to this testimony from John Adams, writing in his old age in 1822 of the arrival at Philadelphia in 1774 of the Massachusetts delegation

to the first Congress. Bear in mind that there was a strong sentiment against independence in his own State:

“We were met at Frankfort by Dr. Rush, Mr. Mifflin, Mr. Bayard and several other of the most active sons of liberty in Philadelphia, who desired a conference with us. We invited them to take tea with us in a private apartment. They asked leave to give us some information and advice, which we thankfully granted. They represented to us that the friends of government in Boston and in the Eastern States had represented us to the Middle and South as four desperate adventurers.

“Mr. Cushing was a harmless kind of man, but poor, and wholly dependent upon his popularity for his subsistence. Mr. Samuel Adams was a very artful, designing man, but desperately poor and wholly dependent on his popularity with the lowest vulgar for his living.

“John Adams and Mr. Paine were two young lawyers, of no great talents, reputation or weight, who had no other means of raising themselves into consequence than by courting popularity. We were all suspected of wishing independence. Now, said they, you must not utter the word independence, nor give the least hint or insinuation of the idea either in Congress or any private conversation; if you do, you are undone; for independence is as unpopular in the Middle or South as the Stamp Act itself. No man dares to speak of it. * * * * * You are thought to be too warm. You must not come forward with any bold measure; you must not pretend to take the lead.

“You know Virginia is the most popular State in the Union—very proud—they think they have a right to lead. The South and Middle are too much disposed to yield to it.’

“This was plain dealing, but it made a deep impression. That conversation has given a coloring to the whole policy of the United States from that day to this.

“You remember that in October, 1775, six months after Lexington and Concord, even John Adams, writing to his wife, said:

“The situation of things is so alarming that it is our duty

to prepare our minds and hearts for every event, even the worst. From my earliest entrance into life I have been engaged in the public cause of America, and from first to last I have had upon my mind a strong impression that things would be wrought up to their present crisis. I saw from the beginning that the controversy was of such a nature that it never would be settled, and every day convinces me more and more.

“This has been the source of all the disquietude of my life. It has lain down and risen up with me these twelve years. The thought that we might be driven to the sad necessity of breaking our connection with Great Britain, exclusive of the carnage and destruction which it was easy to see must attend the separation, always gave me a great deal of grief. And even now, I would gladly retire from public life forever, renounce all chance for profits or honors from the public; nay, I would cheerfully contribute my little property to obtain peace and liberty. But all these must go, and my life, too, before I can surrender the right of my country to a free constitution. I dare not consent to it. I should be the most miserable of mortals ever after, whatever honors or emoluments might surround me.”

“George Washington, who knew the opinion of his time more accurately than most men, wrote to his friend, Captain MacKenzie, of the British army, in 1774, what was unquestionably a summary of the most American sentiment of that year:

“Permit me, with the freedom of a friend (for you know I always esteemed you), to express my sorrow that fortune should place you in a service that must fix curses to the latest posterity upon the contrivers, and, if success (which, by the way, is impossible) accompanies it, execrations upon all those who have been instrumental in the execution.

“Give me leave to add, and I think I can announce it as a fact, that it is not the intent or wish of that government (Massachusetts), or any other upon this continent, separately or collectively, to set up for independence; but this you may at the same time rely on, that none of them will ever submit

to the loss of those valuable rights and privileges which are essential to the happiness of every free state, and without which life, liberty and property are rendered totally insecure. Again give me leave to add, as my opinion, that more blood will be spilled on this occasion, if the ministry are determined to push matters to extremity, than history has ever yet furnished instances of in the annals of North America, and such a vital wound will be given to the peace of this great country as time itself cannot cure or eradicate the remembrance of.'

"As late as the 11th of February, 1776, John Adams wrote from Philadelphia to his wife: 'There is a deep anxiety, a kind of thoughtful melancholy, and in some a lowness of spirits approaching to despondency prevailing through the southern colonies at present. In this or a similar condition we shall remain, I think, until late in the spring, when some critical event will take place; perhaps sooner. But the Arbiter of events only knows which way the torrent will be turned. Judging by experience, by probabilities, and by all appearances, I conclude it will roll on to dominion and glory, though the circumstances and consequences may be bloody.' But he could still say, with sarcasm, 'If a post or two more should bring you unlimited latitude of trade to all nations and a polite invitation to all nations to trade with you, take care that you do not call it or think it independency; no such matter; independency is a hobgoblin of such frightful mien that it would throw a delicate person into fits to look it in the face.'

"Slowly, gradually, keeping step with their colonies, the delegates in Congress were pushed forward by events, the conservatives yielding only to the force of destiny and fighting against independence to the end. Even after the appointment of the committee to prepare the Declaration of Independence in June, even after its report, they maintained the resistance. Thomas Jefferson, who had written the Declaration, with slight assistance from John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, as we see in the rough draft in the library at the State Department, was no debater, and he sat silent through the great three days' discussion of his production, gratefully hailing John Adams, who bore the brunt of its de-

fence, as 'the Colossus of that debate.' But the fight was won on the second day of July, when the Declaration was adopted. John Adams was able to write to his wife on the third in the words that are commonly quoted for the fourth of July, because we celebrate the signing and not the adoption of the Declaration:

"Yesterday the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and greater, perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men.

"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other, and from this time forward for evermore. You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure it will cost us to maintain this Declaration and support and defend these States. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see that the end is more than worth all the means; and that posterity will triumph in that day's transaction even though we should rue it, which I trust in God we shall not.'

"Samuel Adams, the agitator of independence, the arch-revolutionist, the first modern politician, the first modern editor, who did more than any other man to make the public opinion of his time, wrote to his friend, John Pitts, of Boston:

"It must be allowed by the impartial world that this Declaration has not been made rashly—too much, I fear, has been lost by delay, but an accession of several colonies has been gained by it.'

"This tells the story of the evolution through revolution to independence under Anglo-Saxon methods. And these men, who knew how to wait as well as how to act, knew how to compromise and how to negotiate with their opponents, as well as how to fight, adopted the Declaration of Independ-

dence with eyes wide open to the actual circumstances and conditions. They knew, for example, that there were slaves in the colonies. The Congress actually struck out of Jefferson's draft a denunciation of George III for encouraging the slave trade to America, by refusing to ratify the enactments of southern colonies against it. They knew too, that besides the African slaves there were white semi-slaves, 'redemptioners' and the like, who were also not 'equal' before the law or in any other way with themselves, to say nothing of the natural inequalities or the then existing legal differences between men and women, which they also fully recognized.

"All this must be remembered when we read that they declared that 'all men are created equal' and that among their 'unalienable rights' are 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,' and the words can be construed fairly only when this is remembered.

"But these shrewd, strong men of prose were men of poetry, too. Sense and sentiment were joined in them. They were seers. They saw farther into their time and farther into the future than any other men. They belonged to the noble company of those 'who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens.' They saw ideals so clearly that they were constrained to follow them. They were not visionaries, but they were not disobedient to the Heavenly vision. These men who wrenched this continent from the king's hand, who laid the foundations of this mighty nation, cannot be understood unless we realize that they were men of imagination and of spiritual force, poets in the highest sense of the word. This explains why they carried on upon these shores, the battle for political freedom, of Hampden and Pym and Cromwell, fighting side by side, so to speak, with Pitt and Fox and Burke, even while the majority of the people on both sides of the sea clung to the old order, blind followers of the blind conservatives.

"Contrast George Washington with George III, waiving

temporarily the moral and intellectual superiority of Washington, and you will understand why each played the part he took in that great hour of our history. George Washington was the most sensible of men, solid, sagacious, practical, even prosaic in ordinary life, and he never wrote anything that could be called poetry except a few love verses in his courting days. But he could see what the dull Boeotian king of England could not see, and so he could do, and did do, what the Dutch monarch could never have thought of doing. Washington, we are told, 'thought continentally.' He saw beyond the Alleghenies—yes, beyond the Mississippi. He sought to hold the continent for his race and to bind the east and west together with roads and canals for the future greatness, which was real to him. He saw the purer state, the better government, the larger life, of a republic—independent not only of British tyranny, but of European prejudices and traditions, customs and quarrels. He saw ideals which made all sacrifices reasonable. Above all, he labored and endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

"When the new-born nation went down into the valley of the shadow of death at Valley Forge, Washington went down upon his knees to God and prayed for his people like Moses or Joshua. In the terrible hour when Washington was the government, dictator by unanimous consent, and without appointment, because no other man could save the state and the Revolution seemed more likely to fail than to succeed, he rose to his greatest height as he turned to Heaven for the aid earth could not give.

"The men who made the Declaration of Independence and then made it good, left us a goodly heritage, spiritual as well as material. They freed us forever from the fear of foreign tyranny. We dread no foreign foe. We are now the arbiters, if not the masters, of the world, and where we sit at the council of the nations is the head of the table. Our flag floats over countries that George Washington saw dimly, if at all, and millions live under its beauty and blessing who cannot read the Declaration of Independence in the original. We have not only political independence, but political domination in

the world's affairs. But, as Washington foresaw in his Farewell Address, we are in danger from foes within the state, from foes within ourselves. 'Where there is no vision the people perish.' Our political independence, our material power and wealth, will not save us from the moral slavery of Rome and Greece, which ended in destruction. If, in self-indulgence, we yield to the blandishments of materialism, we shall find our strength gone, our limbs bound, our eyes put out, the vision ended, the glory departed.

"It is the duty of every patriot to lift up the standard of personal and civic righteousness, lest the enemy come in like a flood and sweep away our real independence. It is not enough to admire and applaud the heroes of the past; we ourselves must be the heroes and, if needs be, the martyrs of the present. In the faith that the patriots of America will keep alive forever the true 'spirit of '76,' the spirit of self-sacrifice, of splendid courage, and of reverent trust in God and obedience to His will, we may rejoice in the glorious prospects of the Republic.

"Our fathers' God, to Thee,
Author of Liberty,
To Thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright
With Freedom's holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King."



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