



Matthew Brogdon – Declaration Masterclass Video Transcript

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There's an enduring urgency to the Declaration of Independence. It reminds Americans not only of their rights but their duties. The most immediate of these duties was to win the struggle for inde-

pendence. A struggle that would be settled most immediately by military conflict.

But another duty was to establish forms of government that would guard and protect not only America's safety, but its happiness. It was a duty to be exercised by the revolutionary generation, but a duty rooted in natural rights that they've passed on to their posterity.

In this final episode, I want to reflect on both the revolutionary urgency of the Declaration of Independence at the time of its adoption and the vision of society and the concept of happiness that it has entrusted to succeeding generations.

When Congress voted to adopt and publish the text of the Declaration in July 1776, American independence was in fact still fragile and contested, while Washington's army had driven the British from Boston in the spring. The armed contest was far from over. The basic task of crafting new constitutions and forms of government for the states had barely begun.

On the evening of July 4, Congress turned its attention to the task of publishing the Declaration. They directed a local printer, John Dunlap, whose shop was located just four blocks from Independence Hall, at the corner of what is Market and Second Street now, to typeset and print broadside copies for distribution. He did this under the supervision of the committee that had drafted the Declaration.

John Adams later remarked that they were all in haste to get the job done. It's not known for certain how many were printed, but the evidence suggests about 200. One of these was actually pasted into the draft journal of the Continental Congress as the official text of the Declaration. Another copy of the Dunlap broadside can be seen in the small building just next door to Independence Hall, while others are housed in the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

The Declaration of Independence is a revolutionary document, and the first concern of revolution was military victory. This was not a merely philosophical or legal debate.

Recognizing this, John Hancock, serving as president of the Continental Congress, rushed off one of these freshly printed broadsides to George Washington, who was at that time with his troops in the field, defending the island of Manhattan from the impending British invasion of New York.

Washington received the document on July 9, and he commanded the Continental Army to assemble for a public reading. Those fighting for American independence needed to know what kind of country they were fighting for. But the Declaration wasn't simply resistance, nor was its revolutionary nature limited to securing independence from British officials. It was about establishing and protecting a way of life for a free people and securing greater liberty than they had hitherto enjoyed.

While Hancock's messenger rushed a copy of the Declaration to Washington and his army, dozens more were sent to the colonial assemblies, townships, city governments, local committees of correspondence, newspapers, and printers up and down the Atlantic seaboard.

Budding statesmen throughout the fledgling American Union were doing the work of adapting their longstanding forms of colonial government to the needs of independent states. They were doing the critical work not simply of throwing off an inherited form of government, but of instituting new government. Winning battles might win independence, but framing constitutions would sustain it and lay the foundation for an enduring union.

The Declaration launched the project of constitutional self-government. By its terms, a people setting about the task of altering or abolishing their existing form of government must also set themselves the task of instituting new government. This imperative followed on the heels of the right to revolution in the Declaration's text, 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 foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Not just any government will do. Only one that actually secures the safety and happiness of a free people is acceptable. And the only responsible revolution is one that can produce such a government. The language is that of deliberation and intention. A self-governing people must not merely inherit, but decide what form of government they are to have.

It is crucially important that the Declaration does not tell us what form that government will take. It tells us what free government ought to achieve. It should secure the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for its people. It tells us that the people themselves must consent to it or institute it according to their own best judgment. But it does not tell us what institutions the people ought to choose to secure their safety and happiness: constitutional monarchy, legislative supremacy, a complex separation of powers, direct democracy. None of these are clearly foreclosed by the Declaration.

More than a decade later, another body of statesmen would take up the challenge of self-government in the Constitutional Convention. With Washington presiding as statesman rather than general, seated at the front of the room with the rising sun of American freedom on the chair above his head, representatives of the states convened in this same building in 1787 to write a new federal constitution for the United States.

In the first of the Federalist essays arguing for ratification of the Framers' Constitution, Alexander Hamilton hearkened back to the Declaration, pointing out the monumental importance of the American claim to be a self-governing people. "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country," he wrote, "by their conduct and example to decide the important question whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."

Hamilton set up the work of the Framers of the Constitution, and of those charged with ratifying it, as a test of the claim of the Declaration, that a people are really capable of choosing their form of government rather than stumbling into it by accident. The task of founding is more than the revolutionary act of throwing off a tyrant. It requires statesmanship and citizenship, not just military victory.

A self-governing republic is a society of citizens and statesmen ruling and being ruled in turn. Citizens and statesmen in a republic are not separate social orders into which people are born and remain fixed throughout their lives. Citizenship and statesmanship are offices, duties, that any person being willing to undertake them might occupy, though not everyone will do so. Citizens and statesmen are those who take responsibility for the laws and institutions under which they live and their neighbors live.

This means that citizens of a republic are self-governing in a double sense: govern themselves and they govern others. They are self-controlled, which is part of what it means to be virtuous and happy. Someone who is not self-controlled can neither govern themselves nor properly govern others. To lack virtue is therefore to be incapable of self-government. It's to be a subject and not a citizen. In the view of the founding generation, freedom demanded more of the citizens of a republic than was asked of subjects in a monarchy, even the constitutional monarchy of the British Empire in the 18th century.

A modern audience might be surprised to hear the language of virtue and self-control attached to the Declaration of Independence. We tend to emphasize the ideas of liberty and equality when we talk about it. In fact, many serious people from the founding to the present have worried that the Declaration's emphasis on individual liberty and equality might undermine the virtue and willingness to sacrifice for the common good that is essential for Republican citizenship.

It is true that the revolution in government announced by the Declaration weakened government, and it moderated the ambitions of politicians. It does make freedom the basic

criterion of good government, but that freedom is not empty of moral content. The purpose of weakening government and extending the scope of personal freedom was not to diminish the pursuits of human life or encourage a single-minded obsession with the material wealth and physical comfort.

The happiness of the Declaration is not hedonism. The American people are called in the Declaration to consider the happiness of individuals and political communities in much the same way that ancient philosophers debated the highest purposes of human life. The purpose of weakening government was to leave room for the exercise of the highest virtues by free people.

The aspiration of the American Revolution is the creation of a constitutional order in which free citizens can pursue happiness, and only a virtuous person can really be happy. The Declaration says government is instituted to secure rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is important to note what is left out of this list.

Government is not, it seems, instituted to save souls, cultivate virtue, or guarantee a standard of living—at least if that means dictating from above how these things are to be done. But it is to allow—it must allow—for the pursuit of these things by individuals. A government instituted to secure rights will enable free citizens to seek their own and their neighbors salvation and peace and safety, exercise the highest virtues and voluntary association with each other, and empower them to acquire property and employ themselves in any lawful occupation they see fit.

Put in terms of religious liberty, the Declaration moved the sacred and the holy from the plane of coercive authority to the plane of freedom. This was an elevation, not a diminution of religious life. In the political philosophy of the Declaration, the most important things, the things most essential to human happiness, are placed within the realm of human conscience rather than coercion.

The criticism often leveled at the Declaration is that it describes human beings only as individuals with rights rather than social beings with obligations, and is thus too individualistic. By defining politics in terms of rights, some might argue, the Declaration encourages people to focus on themselves and to neglect their responsibilities to others. But I think it is a mistake to say that the freedom envisioned by the Declaration is individualistic.

For those things most essential to happiness, to a life well lived, are usually undertaken in community with others. In fact, the rights that later find expression in the First Amendment with which free governments are most often associated are rarely undertaken by individuals in isolation. The freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition are overwhelmingly undertaken by groups of people associating with one another. American

liberalism is not individualistic, it's pluralistic. The purpose of freedom is not to make Americans into self-absorbed individuals, but to enable them to live with others in

community on the basis of conscience and voluntary association rather than authority and coercion.

The Declaration, in short, is about empowering people to pursue higher ends. It is a narrowing of government, but not of human society and personality. This dynamic is clear enough in the realm of economics. The free market unleashes entrepreneurship, innovation, and trade; it doesn't suppress them.

The same is true of civil society more generally, which is now marked by free association. The increase in civil liberty no more diminishes the vibrancy of religion and virtue than the free market diminishes economic prosperity. The mistake in both cases is thinking of government as the origin of these goods, rather than simply the environment in which they're pursued.

Printing 200 broadside copies and sending them out into the world was all the action that Congress took in the short term to disseminate the Declaration of Independence. Its publication in North America and in Europe was not centrally planned, managed, or directed. Instead, Congress was able to rely on the existence of a free press and the voluntary association of innumerable free people to see the text distributed throughout the world. It was reprinted up and down the Atlantic seaboard, in Great Britain, and on the European continent in newspapers, broadsides, and magazines. Its rapid dissemination still stands as a testament to the importance of a free press and the power of voluntary association to advance the common good.

The Declaration of Independence was a document not only for America, but for the world. It remains true that what is done in America affects not only Americans, but the global reputation of free government, because the challenge of free government is as enduring as the desire for liberty itself. If we're to meet the challenge Hamilton set out in Federalist Number 1, "We must strive to be a people capable of governing ourselves from reflection and choice, not so that we can build or maintain a magnificent structure that we worship as an idol, but so that we can carry on the most important parts of our lives. so that we may live in peace as free people."

Washington put it beautifully in his letter to the Hebrew congregation at Newport early in his presidency. Quoting the prophet Micah, he invoked a vision of a republic of laws in which everyone shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and there should be none to make him afraid.

So the next time you're coaching Little League at the ballpark, participating in a book club, or worshipping with your fellow believers, Remember that the freedom to pursue the best and most important things in life, to pursue happiness, requires us to be self-governing

citizens who strive to preserve and improve the institutions and laws that secure our safety and happiness.

Perhaps Katharine Lee Bates said it best in one of the verses to “America the Beautiful”:

*America, America, God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.*