



Nicholas Cole – Declaration Masterclass Video Transcript

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Near the end of his life, Thomas Jefferson wondered how he would be remembered. His own sense was that one of the most significant things he had ever done was to

have been the principal author of the Declaration of Independence.

But the story of his role is a slightly complicated one. None of America's founding documents was the work of one person, and the Declaration was no exception.

America's revolutionaries prized the idea of deliberation and debate, and both the principle of independence and the wording of the Declaration itself were debated and approved in this room in the summer of 1776. Eleven years later, another group would meet here for three months to debate, paragraph by paragraph, line by line, and even word by word, the Constitution of the United States of America.

A key passage in the Declaration of Independence, the legal language announcing independence, was not written by Jefferson at all. It had been drafted by a convention in Virginia and submitted to Congress by Richard Henry Lee, who was Virginia's representative, and who put the resolution before delegates on the 7th of June, read that “these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent States, and that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved.

This language was debated in Congress in the summer of 1776 as a way of debating the principle of independence itself. It is a reminder that independence was at this point being debated not only in the Continental Congress but across the colonies in many forums.

In writing the Declaration of Independence, its authors had months and years of debate on which to draw. By the summer of 1776, there was both an urgency to the question of independence, and yet still uncertainty about the issue, even within the Second Continental Congress itself.

As late as the 8th of June, debating Lee's resolution, it appeared that there might not be a consensus in favour of declaring independence at all. Several delegates in Congress had instructions from their legislature not to vote that way and needed time to see if their

instructions could be changed. Others still doubted themselves that independence was the right course of action.

Leaving that question unresolved, on the 10th of June, Congress agreed that a committee be appointed nonetheless to write a Declaration of Independence, which would be considered on the 1st of July. That committee was appointed on the 11th of June and consisted of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston and Roger Sherman. Their draft had to incorporate the language suggested by Virginia.

The work of that small group was therefore critically important because Congress would only vote on the resolution for independence that sat lying on the table for debate after the work of the drafting committee of five was complete and members of the Continental Congress could see what form a declaration of independence might take if approved.

For this reason, the declaration was one of two different texts that together ultimately created America's independence. A revised version of Lee's resolution was passed on the 2nd of July and, at this moment, created, as far as Congress was concerned, the independent states of America. That resolution read in its final form, "resolved that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be totally dissolved." That resolution was passed in Independence Hall on the 2nd of July, with New York abstaining.

There can be little doubt that the draft Declaration of Independence text had a crucial part to play in persuading members of Congress to vote for this shorter and more legal resolution. The Declaration was a persuasive text in itself, and Congress clearly felt it necessary to have a public proclamation ready to print and distribute immediately if independence could be agreed.

Yet in a slightly curious series of moves, Congress refused to vote on the question of independence before the draft public Declaration of Independence was before them, and yet did not finalise their revisions of Jefferson's draft until two days after the resolution of independence had been agreed, approving the Declaration of Independence itself for printing only on the 4th of July.

The plan of confederation to which the resolution on independence referred would take until the 15th of November 1777 to debate and adopt, and the Constitutional Convention would meet in the same room just shy of 10 years later to suggest its complete revision.

Although he wanted to be remembered as the Declaration of Independence's author, in his own reflections on his role nearly 50 years later, Jefferson resisted the idea that he had innovated. Rather, he said, he had captured "the spirit of the American mind." Everyone on this side of the water, he told Henry Lee in 1825, had thought alike on the subject of rights, at least in respect of the conflict with Britain.

This was, he said, the object of the Declaration of Independence, not to find out new principles or new arguments never before thought of, not merely 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 were compelled to take, neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing.

It was intended to be an expression of the American mind and to give that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority then rests on the harmonizing sentiments of the day.

But the Declaration was not simply a philosophical document. It had a form and function that transcended a philosophical text. The first military conflict between revolutionary and British forces had occurred in April 1775 at Lexington and Concord. It took over a year for Congress to vote decisively in favour of independence. In that intervening time, many in America still hoped for some new kind of settlement with Britain, one that might guarantee local autonomy within the broader British Empire, even if many others recognised that such compromise would be difficult to achieve and impossible to maintain.

In some ways, the hand of Congress was forced. In August 1775, George III replied to a petition by the colonies brought to London by William Penn by issuing a proclamation declaring that the colonies were in open and avowed rebellion. It was a document that was short, and which could be widely distributed and printed. The fact that the King, whom moderates in Congress such as John Dickinson, had hoped might be the key to resolving the conflict, had sided so unequivocally with Parliament, further ground away from those seeking compromise, and they were in danger of being overtaken by events.

From January 1776, Britain prepared to send further military forces to America and signed a treaty for an initial 4,000 German-speaking troops to assist. Even then, it took until the end of June 1776 for all of the 13 colonies represented in Congress to accept that independence was inevitable. And even then, it was essential, but far from certain, that the colonies present a united front. British military force might well have defeated a smaller rebellion. Benjamin Franklin, of course, famously remarked as the declaration was signed, "We must all hang together, or assuredly, we will all be hanged separately."

Having played its role in the debates that saw wavering members of the Continental Congress cast their vote for independence, once published, the Declaration of Independence had an important domestic function to perform. Just as the British had tried to issue proclamations to deter resistance, the Declaration of Independence needed to assert with finality that legitimate government in America was now exercised by the new states. It is for this reason in part that the Declaration was like the previous British declarations, short. It was meant to be printed and disseminated widely. It also needed to provide reassurance. The declaration needed to be intelligible and yet certain and

profound. It would be read out to America's soldiers, but it would be read out also in the courts of European governments with whom Congress hoped to chart alliances.

As Congress's resolution on independence reminds us, Congress was aware that a successful fight for independence was much more likely if foreign powers would recognise and provide aid to the American states. These potential allies also had a choice to make. Support for Americans would mean war with Britain, and countries like France were not prepared to give essential aid if they were really interfering in an internal squabble about taxation.

For all these reasons, the Declaration needed to have language that was clear, powerful and transcended the moment, capable of being read in many different settings. And all of this, though drawing on language that had been debated and refined in different settings over the previous year, Jefferson achieved. The list of grievances pinned blame for the break with Britain on the actions of the British King. Moderates who had hoped that the Crown might remain a uniting institution in a more decentralised empire had to be shown that hope had never been a real possibility. Contrasted with the British declarations full of threats of violence, it presented a more hopeful future, an America, and in time perhaps a world, built not on the government of force but on the consent of the governed, respecting the rights of mankind.

The second paragraph in particular is well crafted and has been endlessly quoted and emulated in the 250 years since it was written: "We hold these truths to be self-evident," it says, setting out the terms of debate. In every rational system of argument, there must be some small number of axioms simply accepted by both sides. If there are not, there is little to discuss. And from these axioms, Jefferson builds a case that now, in this moment, America has a right to govern itself as an equal on the world stage, a set of colonies no more.

In its form, it has always seemed to me to have had a special and notable wisdom, because the Declaration of Independence is the very opposite of a hot-headed and hasty reaction to any particular policy. It is a document that, yes, charts a long history of poor government in America. It is a document that sets out clearly a right of revolution, but not, as Jefferson says, "for light and transient causes," but only once a long train of abuses has been established and all other options for their correction have been exhausted. It is a document that lays the groundwork for a prosperous, stable United States of America, rooted in a respect for rights.

The contrast between the British demand for obedience and the American respect for the opinions of mankind is clear and intended to be devastating. The United States might have declared its foundation in a more perfunctory manner. Plenty of declarations of independence since have not captured the world's imagination in the way that Jefferson's language has done. It left for the generation in 1776, and it leaves for generations of Americans today the question of how best to put that principle into practice.

In that way, of all of America's founding texts, the Declaration is the one that seems most to transcend its own particular moment, in spite of being a long list of very specific grievances levied against particular British administrations. Jefferson's modest description

of his role protests a little too much. The Declaration of Independence may have been an attempt to say as much as could be said in a fraught and anxious moment when not all agreed, but it was not merely a reflection of the American mind. In the moment it was written, it also did much to create and reinforce the harmonising sentiments that unite America and which continue to inspire so many around the world.

What though of this room, the room where it happened? This room says something important about America's founding. In this room, staunch advocates of independence debated rationally for months with those who favoured a more cautious approach. Some British commentators believed that the Americans had engaged in a wanton and unnatural act of rebellion. And in the history of the world, it was certainly an unusual one, a revolution governed by process, by rational debate, and insofar as the nature of the thing would admit, by very public processes, not only in this room, but in assemblies across America.

The Committee of Five's draft Declaration of Independence, which gave form to the resolutions passed in this room, was then debated and amended here before being sent for printing and dissemination. America's revolution had many patriots and leaders, but all of them submitted to processes to govern and guide their actions, even to the point of delaying a declaration that, by July 1776, many felt was long overdue.

But sitting in this room, I like to remember too that the men that put their names to the declaration believed that great things, necessary things, should nevertheless be done in the proper way.