

Savannah Eccles Johnston – Declaration Masterclass Video Transcript

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Shortly before his death in 1850, Senator John C. Calhoun, one of the great villains in American history, delivered an address in the U.S.

Senate on the Oregon Bill, which organized Oregon as a free territory. Calhoun spent the bulk of his address attacking not the bill itself, but rather a statement written 72 years previously which he termed the most false and dangerous of all political errors.

What was that statement? It was this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” Why? What made that statement so dangerous in the antebellum era? Why did Calhoun feel the need to reject it as false and as a completely unnecessary addition by Jefferson into a document merely declaring independence from Great Britain on the floor of the United States Senate?

Because Calhoun understood one thing correctly. The equality statement in the Declaration of Independence is the most politically potent, transformative, and authoritative idea in all of human history.

In a previous episode, Bradley showed how the Declaration grounded equality in natural law. My focus is on how the Declaration has shaped American history.

The Declaration's equality principle has defined our journey and our struggle as a nation. It is the core of the American creed. So what does it mean? Well, you know what it means. It's intuitive. It's self-evident. It's obvious to you. This isn't a mysterious concept available only to the fancy philosophers. The meaning of this statement is within the grasp of any rational being, and that's the key.

The declaration isn't talking about equality in physical or intellectual attributes. It means just what it says. All human beings are created with an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You can confidently look into the eyes of your neighbor and see a person of inherent moral dignity and worth, just as you have inherent dignity and worth. Each person has the moral and rational capacity to be self-governing, which means no one has the right given by God or nature to rule over or govern another person without their consent.

I can't declare myself the divinely appointed queen of America and throw my neighbor Mike into prison for refusing to obey the laws that I wrote in my basement. Mike has the right to govern himself and I only get to be in charge with his consent to both my leadership and the laws I write. But this idea of equality and consent is only obvious because we live in a world remade by the Declaration and the ideas it repeated.

This was not the ancient creed. It was certainly not obvious or self-evident to the Babylonians or the Egyptians or the Greeks that human beings are created equal. For them, inequality was the obvious fact of life. I don't mean merely that some people are taller or more athletic or better looking and far more intelligent than others. I mean that some humans were superior by nature. They had a right to rule over others. Kings over subjects, priests over peasants, husbands over wives, one race over another. That's what made the ideas asserted or reasserted.

Jefferson made it clear that none of these ideas were original to him in the Declaration, so radical. It broke apart the division of the world between rulers and ruled. Except, of course, the world of rulers and the ruled was the standard in 1776 America. Two big violations of Jefferson's principle were staring him in the face at the time he wrote what might be the most famous words in the English language. The subjugation of women and the existence of slavery.

So was Jefferson blind? Was he lying? Or as Steven Douglas would later claim, did he just mean that all white males are created equal? None of the above. Lincoln said it best. They, the Founders, did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare that right, so the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all and revered by all, constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

Take women as an example. In March of 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John, pleading with him to remember the ladies in the new country that this Continental Congress was creating. John forgot to remember, and coverture laws remained in place. Coverture laws basically meant that women had no legal identity or rights separate from their husbands. They were under the control or governance of their fathers until marriage when that control was transferred to their husband.

This is a clear example of the ancient creed. Husbands were assumed to have a natural right to rule over their wives because of some business about a garden and woman being created inferior to man. And since marriage was a relationship between unequals, no consent was required.

Yet at the same time that coverture laws existed in the colonies, the Declaration of Independence stated that all men are created equal. Did it mean only men, or is that a word interchangeable with human? If it was the former, then the original inequality, that between men and women, remained in force. And if one half of humanity is by nature created to rule over the other half, then there is no equality for humankind at all. The logic of the equality principle fails.

But Lincoln was correct. The declaration was simply declaring the equality of mankind so that the enforcement of it might follow as soon as circumstances would permit. And the struggle for women's equality shows just how powerful and motivating the equality principle is as a political doctrine.

In 1848, 100 attendees at the Seneca Falls Convention signed the Declaration of Sentiments that stated, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal." Though that equality was not yet realized in 1848, progress was being made all over the nation. Women were laying claim to the promise made in the Declaration. Coverture laws were overturned slowly in the individual states throughout the 19th century. The Supreme Court ruled in an 1875 case called *Minor v. Happersett* that women were in fact persons and citizens, just not the voting kind. And in 1920, women finally secured the right to vote in the 19th Amendment, and on it has gone.

The most painful struggle over the meaning and application of the equality doctrine, however, has been with the institution of slavery and racial discrimination. In fact, the gap between the standards set by the equality principle and the reality of slavery in this nation led to the bloodiest war in American history.

Slavery was a fact of life in the colonies in 1776. Over 450,000 enslaved persons were brought to the United States via the transatlantic slave trade. That number would balloon to over 4.5 million enslaved persons by the time of the Civil War. The vast majority of these enslaved persons lived in the South.

In 1776, slavery was legal in all 13 colonies, but it's a mistake to think that slavery was morally acceptable at the time of the founding. It was accepted, yes, but only as a necessary evil. The dominant feeling among the framers was that slavery was on its way out. All that was needed was time. Yet many of these same Framers owned slaves. Thomas Jefferson himself owned over 200 slaves in his lifetime. The principle of equality in the Declaration had a powerful effect on the new states. By 1804, all northern states had enacted gradual emancipation laws. Liberalizing laws that allowed manumission were also either implemented or debated in some southern states, such as Virginia, as well.

But moral progress is never a guarantee in any nation. That was certainly true in antebellum America. That old villain, Calhoun, declared on the floor of the Senate in 1837 that slavery was not an evil, but a positive good. Such a statement was astonishing when

compared to the dominant opinion on slavery just one generation earlier. Calhoun's speech signaled a dangerous shift in regards to public opinion on slavery.

By the 1850s, the nation had experienced a significant moral regression. Long-standing doctrines and laws that had prohibited the expansion of slavery into the territories were overturned by the Supreme Court or replaced by the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which allowed each territory to decide for itself whether it would be free or slave. Slavery was thoroughly entrenched. And standing against it all was the Declaration.

Humans can't stand cognitive dissonance. How could a nation increasingly accepting of slavery morally, politically, and culturally also base their political identity as a nation on a document that declared all men equal? Is it any wonder that Calhoun felt the need to publicly attack the equality principle as dangerous and incorrect in one of his final addresses? Or that Chief Justice Taney attempted to rewrite the history of the declaration in his famous Dred Scott opinion by declaring that blacks were never meant to be included in the declaration? Or that Stephen Douglas likewise argued as both a Senate candidate in 1858 and a presidential candidate in 1860 that the declaration was never intended to include black men and women?

Lincoln argued fiercely against both Taney and Douglas, challenging them to “search the whole records of the country and it will be a matter of great astonishment to me if they shall be able to find that one human being three years ago had ever uttered the astounding sentiment that the term all men in the Declaration did not include the Negro.” The Founders simply never said that. They often used the phrases “rights of mankind,” “rights of humanity,” and “human rights” interchangeably. It was clear that the phrase “all men” meant all humans.

For example, Hamilton wrote in 1775 that “natural liberty is a gift of the beneficent creator to the whole human race.” Jefferson wrote that slavery was a violation of rights and that he “trembled for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.”

Most tellingly, the creators of the Confederacy agreed with Lincoln on the true meaning of the equality principle. Rejection of the Declaration was the cornerstone of the Confederacy, just as slavery was the immediate cause of secession. Listen to the words of Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy: “The prevailing ideas entertained by him, meaning Jefferson, and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature, that it was wrong in principle socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil that they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that somehow or other in the order of providence the institution would be evanescent and pass away. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation and the government built upon it fell when the storm came and the wind blew.”

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea. The Civil War was ultimately a battle over the principle of the Declaration. It was a battle for the American soul. That was the point Lincoln was making at Gettysburg: “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.”

The Civil War and Reconstruction Amendments gave this nation a new birth of freedom. It recommitted the nation and its constitution to the equality principle. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment extended citizenship to all born on American soil and guaranteed equal protection of the laws. The 15th Amendment protected voting rights, essential for consent to all men.

But the nation's journey to the ends laid out in the Declaration didn't end at Appomattox Court House or with Reconstruction, which failed as often as it succeeded. It would take another 100 years before the civil-rights movement once again challenged the nation to finally live up to its founding promise that all men are created equal. And we're still not done.

The equality principle is the most powerful political idea in American history. We've spent the past 250 years fighting over its meaning, laboring to fulfill its promise, and haunted by our failings to do so. And so long as the Republic stands with the declaration as our common creed, that struggle will continue.