

The Lies of the Declaration

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I must preface this essay by stating that I do not intend to come across as pessimistic. However, I know that readers who are viewing this piece care deeply about America, its history, and politics. Thus, people are generally aware of the faults that exist in our nation, and even more so, the seldom-walked path we must take in addressing these faults.

The Declaration of Independence, despite not being a law, acts as a manifesto for American values, both in my mind and the minds of millions of Americans (and thus, I will be referring to it as it should have been followed based upon the exact words of its ideals). It promised a new beginning for world history: a new country, undaunted by all that came before it, was ready to pursue independence, with liberty and justice for all, something rarely found in the annals of history. Except it was not.

America was founded by the elite order that ruled it before it was America, when it was the 13 original colonies. The founding fathers were nearly all men of wealth, privilege, and excess, making their stations and fortunes based on unequal social standings and upon the backs of millions of forcefully enslaved Africans and poor Whites. George Washington was a British Army Officer during the Seven Year's (French & Indian) War, and a lacking one at that. Washington was no Alexander or Hannibal, who both came long before him, and certainly was not anything close to Napoleon, who came shortly after. Despite how much he is celebrated as a man who passed over power when he could have held onto it, he spent his free time in retirement hiring bounty hunters to track down and capture escaped slaves who fled from his iron discipline at Mount Vernon.

Thomas Jefferson, by today's standards, not only kept slaves, but also had intimate relations with his daughter's handmaiden, Sally Hemings, fathering numerous children with her whilst never acknowledging their parentage. Benjamin Franklin was more skilled in seducing Parisian noblewomen than in advancing America's cause abroad, prompting his replacement by John Adams, who did not even speak French and had defended the British responsible for the Boston Massacre only a few years before.

I do not mean to question the intelligence of these founding fathers (despite their political philosophy being directly influenced, and nigh copied, from men like Locke and Rousseau, particularly in the writing of the Declaration), but rather, their character. And thus, I ask, is it good that Americans constantly think of these men when remembering our beginning? Surely there must be a better way, better men, and perhaps God, *some* women besides Betsy Ross, or slaveholders like Martha Washington, to seek inspiration?

I want to take a second to revisit some themes I included in my essay portion of my application to Lehigh. I aspire to be a history teacher, and eventually, a professor (I am currently in the 4+1 program to gain a master's degree in secondary education). In my essay, I spoke about my inspirations and desire for wanting to pursue education despite our country's abandonment of many of its own purported tenets, and their funding, by today's administration. My father is the greatest educator I have ever known and has inspired me to pursue this career myself. Despite his own misgivings and difficulties during his 31-year tenure as a high school educator, his love for his subject and his students always trounced any negativities.

Building upon his empathy and maturity, I wrote that I want to be a teacher who acknowledges the darker aspects of American history. I intend to not only acknowledge but

explore that path at a level rarely experienced in high school. As a people, Americans have struggled, and still struggle today, to acknowledge the horrific events of our past. It took us nearly 200 years to make African Americans equal under law, and as we have evidenced in recent weeks at Lehigh, socially this often means very little. We imprisoned millions of loyal American citizens of Japanese ancestry during WWII. We butchered a million Filipinos as we invaded their homes, whilst claiming that we were not imperialists.

And so, I ask, how many American students are taught the truth of these events, or that, for instance, the South started the Civil War over a reactionary obsession with slavery (which is an undeniable, objective fact, as modern academia has proven)? Few, if any, is the answer. And while I acknowledge my privilege in this, I have dedicated my years as a student to filling in the gaps my education left behind. We as Americans should hold ourselves to a higher historical and baseline empathetic standard. Most people do not do this, but they cannot be entirely blamed, because often they simply do not know these dark events happened. How can one be scolded for (or even simply educated about) something of this historical and human magnitude that they have no idea happened? *This* is the darkest aspect of American history and education: anything that portrays us as the very monsters we claim to fight against is never discussed.

Contrast this pattern of behavior with a nation like Germany, whose sins are clear in the minds of most of the world to this day, and rightly so. *They* teach the Holocaust to every student at a young age and take full responsibility for it. Germany has outlawed Holocaust denialism and hate speech that supports Nazi values. They course-corrected, changed, and ensured that something like the Holocaust will have as little chance as possible to occur again.

Here in America, what have we learned from our tragic mistakes? The War of Independence and the subsequent War of 1812 were greatly motivated by racism towards Native Indians and enslaved Africans. We betrayed treaties, broke our word, and massacred and displaced populations in the interest of manifest destiny, an idea whose name would be coined later but whose values were around ever since 1776, and even before. We returned millions of slaves to a system that they had already experienced for over a century; we called it something brand new after claiming the nation was fixed after the Civil War. Every time new immigrant groups appeared, whether they were Spanish, French, or more famously, Irish, Italian, and Chinese, they were demonized by the majority Protestant Anglo-Saxon population. We witness the same thing today with Islamophobia. None of these groups were made equal. Yet the Declaration promised and even propagandized itself as an egalitarian document which the nation it applied to would welcome all people to this country. This document was never actually intended to make all equal, despite public opinion on the subject.

We are still a society that marginalizes minorities. Our Congress is a prime example of this, as only 28.5 percent of members are women; yet women make up half of the population. The Declaration of Independence, signed 250 years ago, promised these problems would be issues of a past civilization and past world. It has failed greatly in delivering on this. But then again, and as I have indicated before, the stated intentions of complete equality and egalitarian values being given to all races, genders, and those with disabilities were not really what the founders sought. Their status quo of being able to kick natives off their land as they saw fit, and exploiting both enslaved Africans and poor Whites, were what the American “revolution” was truly about.

What all of this makes clear is that Americans of the 21st century need to be better educated on their history. While this is a long and arduous undertaking, what I find a promising first step is rewriting the standard American history myth of exceptionalism and egalitarian

values in favor of a more inclusive and socialized narrative. For every good deed George Washington or Thomas Jefferson did in their lives, and inspired in others after their deaths, a caveat needs to follow up. For instance, Washington was a calculating man who rewarded ability, not just loyalty (true). But Washington was also a notorious slaveholder, and whilst condemning the practice, also continued holding men, women, and children in bondage (also true). These few sentences highlight a grey man, a man with flaws and issues we, as a 21st-century audience, may clearly understand. The problem with the “Great Man” theory of history is that it downplays any wrongs done as par-for-the-course, or necessities, both being outweighed by the positive aspects. That is a terrible way to teach history and critical thinking. It should be up to each individual to decide if he or she believes that a man like Washington was a good man, a bad man, or somewhere in between. The same approach should be taken towards laws, cases, and of course, the Declaration of Independence. To me, the Declaration is a document that has never lived up to its promises. It planted false hopes in the poor and destitute of the country in favor of mobilizing them to fight for the interests of the rich and elite.

But I do want to suggest more examples for improvement within American historical understanding and narratives. I concede that all of these are very unlikely to happen in the coming years, but I still feel they act as a strong blueprint for a progressive understanding and study of American history.

First, the beginning of American history (the American Revolution) cannot simply start in 1776 (or even in the French and Indian War). Racial, gender, and religious commentary must be made first and foremost to understand these events. Everyone who was not a rich, White elite had little say in the governing of the country, yet it was these same disheveled and forgotten people who answered the call of becoming militia in the Continental Army. Make the American story the story of the forgotten, the beaten, and the hopeful. Those at the lowest caste of society being driven by an ideal, and, of course, with that same ideal having commentary done upon its truth or falsehood, and how it manipulates those same poor and disenfranchised people to die for a war between elites. Tout the victories of the common man, and to an even further extent, tout the victories achieved by women and minorities in their endless fight for freedom in this nation.

Second, stop using military actions as placeholders to jump into history (and I say this as a military historian). While fascinating and often easier to understand than intricate politicking or social movements, military narratives hinder the story at home and the story of the individual person and their motivations. A battle like Gettysburg can inform us how many young men died and how many wives and mothers had to hear of this news through a ragged piece of parchment. Instead, we should use military engagements and wars as vignettes to understand the societal events of the time and the psyche that *prompted* these men march to war. As fascinating as I find battle history, little of the human experience of history or deeper commentaries on the “why” can be gleaned from it. Moreover, it diminishes the experience of the common soldier, making him just another statistic as we study names like Lee, Grant, Meade, Washington, and Greene.

Third, find individuals who embody the true ideal of the “American Dream,” and find them outside of the typical narrative. Focus on local civil rights leaders, workers and unions, and those who balk at the current system and fight, and sometimes die, in their attempts to right the wrong they see inherent in an American society that says one thing and does another. Great Men will give us little in our understanding of the American Dream, as they have often been given everything as soon as they come out of the womb. Embolden the story of the refugee, the housewife, the slave and spend *more* time on them and their teachings and what they tell us. Someone like Smedley Butler always comes to mind for me here. A career Marine who, after his

decades of being made to fight wars for bigwigs on Wall Street, Butler coined the saying “War is a Racket”, warning against the military industrial complex and the use of nationalist “civilizing” rhetoric to mobilize a nation to murder. Butler even outed a fascist plot to overthrow the government during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency, as the conspirators tried to convince him to become a dictator. Butler stayed true to his ideals and the ideals of America, protecting the common person and the rule of law, outing these big business tycoons for what they were: cowardly and greedy cretins. They faced no repercussions, but Butler had remained true to his beliefs. He was rightly labeled a hero in his own lifetime (and still is one) of anti-fascist movements everywhere, something we can glean many lessons from today.

To conclude, none of the readers of this essay are under any false premises of the faults in America, both historically and today. The Declaration of Independence failed to deliver us the society it promised because those writing it got what they needed out of it and promptly abandoned its ideas. It is up to us, then, to decide if this document defines us. To me, it does not. We, the People, can create something much better, and should, and will. It starts with understanding the faults of our history, but the bright spots too. In due time, I feel Americans will correct this error and finally live up to our collective ideals.

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