

# The Declaration of Independence

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**IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776**

**The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,**

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --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 foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his

Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

# The Declaration of Independence: The Words Heard Around the World

No American document has had a bigger global impact than the Declaration of Independence.

By **DAVID ARMITAGE**, July 3, 2014, The Wall Street Journal

The Declaration of Independence is the birth certificate of the American nation—the first public document ever to use the name "the United States of America"—and has been fundamental to American history longer than any other text. It enshrined what came to be seen as the most succinct and memorable statement of the ideals on which the U.S. was founded: the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; the consent of the governed; and resistance to tyranny.

But the Declaration's influence wasn't limited to the American colonies of the late 18th century. No American document has had a greater impact on the wider world. As the first successful declaration of independence in history, it helped to inspire countless movements for independence, self-determination and revolution after 1776 and to this very day. As the 19th-century Hungarian nationalist, Lajos Kossuth, put it, the U.S. Declaration of Independence was nothing less than "the noblest, happiest page in mankind's history."

In telling this story of global influence, however, it is important to separate two distinct elements of the Declaration—elements that sometimes get conflated. The first of these is the assertion of popular sovereignty to create a new state: in the Declaration's words, the right of "one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them." The second and more famous element of the Declaration is its ringing endorsement of the sanctity of the individual: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

It is crucial to make this distinction because, over the past three centuries, the Declaration's global impact has had much more to do with the spread of sovereignty and the creation of states than with the diffusion and acceptance of ideas of individual rights. There is no necessary relationship between a state's independence in conducting its own affairs and its respect for the freedoms of individuals. Indeed, as news reports remind us daily, how to protect universal human rights in a world of sovereign states, each of which jealously guards itself from interference by outside authorities, remains one of the most pressing dilemmas of international politics.

The Declaration of Independence was addressed as much to the world at large as to the population of the American colonies. In the opening paragraph, its authors—Thomas Jefferson, the five-member congressional committee of which he was part and the Second Continental Congress itself—appealed to "the opinions of Mankind." They submitted an extensive list of facts to "a candid world" to prove that King George III had acted tyrannically. His colonial subjects could rightfully leave the British Empire. They solemnly declared "That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES," possessing "the full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which INDEPENDENT STATES may of right do."

The colonists declared, in short, that they were now citizens rather than subjects and asked other "powers of the earth" to decide whether or not to acknowledge the United States of America among their number. The colonists needed military, diplomatic and commercial help in their struggle against Great Britain; only a major power, like France or Spain, could supply that aid. So long as they remained within the British Empire, they would be treated as rebels. If they organized themselves into political bodies with which other powers could engage, then they might become legitimate belligerents in an international conflict rather than treasonous combatants in a civil war.

The Declaration thus marked the entry of one people, constituted into 13 states, into what we would now call international society. It did so by invoking the "law of nations," especially as described in the hugely influential 1758 book of that title by the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel, a copy of which Benjamin Franklin had sent to Congress in 1775. Vattel spoke the language of rights and freedom, sovereignty and independence, and the Declaration's use of his terms was designed to reassure the world beyond North America that the U.S. would abide by the rules of international behavior. It was as much a declaration of interdependence with other powers as it was a declaration of independence from Great Britain.

The other powers were naturally curious about what the Declaration said. By August 1776, news of American independence and copies of the Declaration itself had reached London, Edinburgh and Dublin, as well as the Dutch Republic and Austria. By the fall of that year, Danish, Italian, Swiss and Polish readers had heard the news, and many could now read the Declaration in their own language as translations appeared across Europe.

The document inspired diplomatic debate in France, but that potential ally only began public negotiations after the American victory at the battle of Saratoga in October 1777. The Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce of February 1778 was the first formal recognition of the U.S. as "free and independent states." French assistance would be crucial, of course, to the success of the American cause. It also turned the American war into a global conflict that would involve Britain, France, Spain and the Dutch Republic in military operations around the globe and that would shape the fate of empires extending across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans.

The ultimate success of American independence was swiftly acknowledged to be an event of world-historical significance. "A great revolution has happened—a revolution made, not by chopping and changing of power in any one of the existing states, but by the appearance of a new state, of a new species, in a new part of the globe," wrote the British politician and writer Edmund Burke. With Sir William Herschel's recent discovery of the planet Uranus in mind, he continued: "It has made as great a change in all the relations, and balances, and gravitation of power, as the appearance of a new planet would in the system of the solar world."

It is a striking historical irony that, among white Americans, the Declaration itself almost immediately sank into oblivion, what Abraham Lincoln in 1857 described as "old wadding left to rot on the battlefield after the victory is won." African-Americans, however, were quick to see the Declaration's liberating potential. As early as the summer of 1776, Lemuel Haynes, a free black who had served in the Continental Army, turned to the "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal" and possess "unalienable rights" as inspiration for an abolitionist sermon.

Among whites, the Fourth of July was widely celebrated but not the Declaration itself. It re-emerged in the early 1790s as a bone of political contention in the partisan struggles between pro-British Federalists and pro-French Republicans after the French Revolution. Only after the War of 1812 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 did it become the revered cornerstone of a new American patriotism.

Imitations of the Declaration were also slow in coming. In January 1790, the Austrian province of Flanders expressed a desire to become a free and independent state in a document whose concluding lines drew directly on a French translation of the American Declaration. The allegedly self-evident truths of the Declaration's second paragraph did not appear in this Flemish manifesto nor would they in most of the 120 or so declarations of independence issued around the world in the following two centuries. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen would have a greater global impact as a charter of individual rights. The sovereignty of states, as laid out in the opening and closing paragraphs of the American Declaration, was the main message that peoples beyond America heard in the document after 1776.

More than half of the 193 countries now represented at the United Nations have a founding document that can be called a declaration of independence. Most of those countries came into being from the wreckage of empires or confederations, from Spanish America in the 1810s and 1820s to the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Their declarations of independence, like the American Declaration, informed the world that one people or state was now asserting—or reasserting, in many cases in the second half of the 20th century—its sovereignty and independence.

Many looked back directly to the American Declaration for inspiration. In 1811, for example, Venezuela's representatives declared "that these united Provinces are, and ought to be, from this day, by act and right, Free, Sovereign, and Independent States." The Texas declaration of independence in 1836 also followed the American model in listing grievances and claiming freedom and independence, as would the secession proclamations of many of the states of the Confederacy.

In the 20th century, nationalists in Central Europe and Korea after the World War I staked their claims to sovereignty by borrowing the language used at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The authors of Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 worked from a copy of the American original. Even the white minority government of Southern Rhodesia in 1965 made its unilateral declaration of independence from the British Parliament by adopting the form of the 1776 Declaration, though it ended with a royalist salutation: "God Save the Queen!" The international community did not recognize that declaration because, unlike many similar pronouncements made during the process of decolonization by other African countries, it did not speak for all the people of the country.

Only a few of these later documents copied the American formula with respect to individual rights. The 1847 Liberian declaration of independence recognized "in all men, certain natural and inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, and enjoy property. " This was a significant amendment to the original Declaration's right to happiness, a less immediately actionable claim for the former slaves who had settled Liberia under the aegis of the American Colonization Society and who had themselves once been treated as property.

Almost a century later, in September 1945, the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh opened his declaration of independence with the "immortal statement" from the 1776 Declaration: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." But he also updated and explained those words: "In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples of the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free." It would be hard to find a more concise summary of the message of the Declaration for the postcolonial predicaments of the late 20th century.

So long as peoples come to believe, as the American colonists did, that their rights have been assaulted in a "long Train of Abuses and Usurpations," they will seek to protect those rights within their own state, for which international custom demands a declaration of independence. In February 2008, the majority Albanian population of Kosovo declared their independence of Serbia in a document designed to reassure the world that their cause offered no precedent for any similar separatist or secessionist movements.

More than half of the current powers of the earth have so far recognized this Kosovar declaration, but such notable members of the international community as Russia, China and Spain have held out. They have resisted for fear of encouraging the breakup of their own territories, where separatist sentiment exists among ethnic and religious minorities of varying degrees of political self-consciousness. (Yet, last March, when it suited its own strategic purposes to encourage the breakup of Ukraine, Russia cynically supported a Crimean declaration of independence modeled directly on Kosovo's.)

For Russia and China, a still deeper problem with the language of popular sovereignty is its connection to the idea of individual rights. In the Declaration of Independence, the same principles that empowered one people to separate from the British Empire also gave them, as individuals, certain expectations about how they would be treated by their own governments in the future. Today's authoritarians are eager to flex their sovereign muscles, especially in suppressing dissent at home and criticism from abroad, but they don't like the second half of the equation—the notion that their authority derives, ultimately, from the "unalienable rights" of their citizens.

In July 1776, the world-historical potential of the Declaration of Independence was hardly evident, but the centuries that followed have demonstrated the wide appeal of its principles. As Thomas Jefferson wrote just weeks before his death on July 4, 1826, the Declaration was "an instrument" that had been "pregnant with our own and the fate of the world," encouraging people everywhere "to assume the blessings and security of self-government."

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## Excerpt from *Chapter 4: Tyranny is Tyranny*, from **A People's History of the United States**, by Howard Zinn

... "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands . . . they should declare the causes...." This was the opening of the Declaration of Independence. Then, in its second paragraph, came the powerful philosophical statement:

**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, 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....**

It then went on to list grievances against the King, "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." The list accused the King of dissolving colonial governments, controlling judges, sending "swarms of Officers to harass our people," sending in armies of occupation, cutting off colonial trade with other parts of the world, taxing the colonists without their consent, and waging war against them, "transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny."

All this, the language of popular control over governments, the right of rebellion and revolution, indignation at political tyranny, economic burdens, and military attacks, was language well suited to unite large numbers of colonists, and persuade even those who had grievances against one another to turn against England.

Some Americans were clearly omitted from this circle of united interest drawn by the Declaration of Independence: Indians, black slaves, women. Indeed, one paragraph of the Declaration charged the King with inciting slave rebellions and Indian attacks:

**He has excited domestic insurrections amongst as, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.**

Twenty years before the Declaration, a proclamation of the legislature of Massachusetts of November 3, 1755, declared the Penobscot Indians "rebels, enemies and traitors" and provided a bounty: "For every scalp of a male Indian brought in ... forty pounds. For every scalp of such female Indian or male Indian under the age of twelve years that shall be killed ... twenty pounds... ."

Thomas Jefferson had written a paragraph of the Declaration accusing the King of transporting slaves from Africa to the colonies and "suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce." This seemed to

express moral indignation against slavery and the slave trade (Jefferson's personal distaste for slavery must be put alongside the fact that he owned hundreds of slaves to the day he died). Behind it was the growing fear among Virginians and some other southerners about the growing number of black slaves in the colonies (20 percent of the total population) and the threat of slave revolts as the number of slaves increased. Jefferson's paragraph was removed by the Continental Congress, because slaveholders themselves disagreed about the desirability of ending the slave trade. So even that gesture toward the black slave was omitted in the great manifesto of freedom of the American Revolution.

The use of the phrase "all men are created equal" was probably not a deliberate attempt to make a statement about women. It was just that women were beyond consideration as worthy of inclusion. They were politically invisible. Though practical needs gave women a certain authority in the home, on the farm, or in occupations like midwifery, they were simply overlooked in any consideration of political rights, any notions of civic equality.

To say that the Declaration of Independence, even by its own language, was limited to life, liberty, and happiness for white males is not to denounce the makers and signers of the Declaration for holding the ideas expected of privileged males of the eighteenth century. Reformers and radicals, looking discontentedly at history, are often accused of expecting too much from a past political epoch—and sometimes they do. But the point of noting those outside the arc of human rights in the Declaration is not, centuries late and pointlessly, to lay impossible moral burdens on that time. It is to try to understand the way in which the Declaration functioned to mobilize certain groups of Americans, ignoring others. Surely, inspirational language to create a secure consensus is still used, in our time, to cover up serious conflicts of interest in that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race.

The philosophy of the Declaration, that government is set up by the people to secure their life, liberty, and happiness, and is to be overthrown when it no longer does that, is often traced to the ideas of John Locke, in his *Second Treatise on Government*. That was published in England in 1689, when the English were rebelling against tyrannical kings and setting up parliamentary government. The Declaration, like Locke's *Second Treatise*, talked about government and political rights, but ignored the existing inequalities in property. And how could people truly have equal rights, with stark differences in wealth?

Locke himself was a wealthy man, with investments in the silk trade and slave trade, income from loans and mortgages. He invested heavily in the first issue of the stock of the Bank of England, just a few years after he had written his *Second Treatise* as the classic statement of liberal democracy. As adviser to the Carolinas, he had suggested a government of slave owners run by wealthy land barons.

Locke's statement of people's government was in support of a revolution in England for the free development of mercantile capitalism at home and abroad. Locke himself regretted that the labor of poor children "is generally lost to the public till they are twelve or fourteen years old" and suggested that all children over three, of families on relief, should attend "working schools" so they would be "from infancy . . . inured to work."



The English revolutions of the seventeenth century brought representative government and opened up discussions of democracy. But, as the English historian Christopher Hill wrote in *The Puritan Revolution*: "The establishment of parliamentary supremacy, of the rule of law, no doubt mainly benefited the men of property." The kind of arbitrary taxation that threatened the security of property was overthrown, monopolies were ended to give more free reign to business, and sea power began to be used for an imperial policy abroad, including the conquest of Ireland. The Levellers and the Diggers, two political movements which wanted to carry equality into the economic sphere, were put down by the Revolution.

One can see the reality of Locke's nice phrases about representative government in the class divisions and conflicts in England that followed the Revolution that Locke supported. At the very time the American scene was becoming tense, in 1768, England was racked by riots and strikes—of coal heavers, saw mill workers, halters, weavers, sailors—because of the high price of bread and the miserable wages. The *Annual Register* reviewed the events of the spring and summer of 1768:

**A general dissatisfaction unhappily prevailed among several of the lower orders of the people. This ill temper, which was partly occasioned by the high price of provisions, and partly proceeded from other causes, too frequently manifested itself in acts of tumult and riot, which were productive of the most melancholy consequences.**

"The people" who were, supposedly, at the heart of Locke's theory of people's sovereignty were defined by a British member of Parliament: "I don't mean the mob. ... I mean the middling people of England, the manufacturer, the yeoman, the merchant, the country gentleman. . . ."

In America, too, the reality behind the words of the Declaration of Independence (issued in the same year as Adam Smith's capitalist manifesto, *The Wealth of Nations*) was that a rising class of important people needed to enlist on their side enough Americans to defeat England, without disturbing too much the relations of wealth and power that had developed over 150 years of colonial history. Indeed, 69 percent of the signers of the Declaration of Independence had held colonial office under England.

When the Declaration of Independence was read, with all its flaming radical language, from the town hall balcony in Boston, it was read by Thomas Crafts, a member of the Loyal Nine group, conservatives who had opposed militant action against the British. Four days after the reading, the Boston Committee of Correspondence ordered the townsmen to show up on the Common for a military draft. The rich, it turned out, could avoid the draft by paying for substitutes; the poor had to serve.' This led to rioting, and shouting: "Tyranny is Tyranny let it come from whom it may."

# Independence Day for Whom?

By **Dion Rabouin**, July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, The Huffington Post

About a week after the Supreme Court rolled back the Voting Rights Act under the make-believe pretense of racial equality in America, it seemed as good a time as any to appraise the notion of "Independence Day."

The High Court has told us that race is no longer a barrier to voting less than a year after 180 new voting restrictions were rolled out in 41 states.

Less than 48 hours after the Supreme Court's decision, six of the nine states that had been covered by the Voting Rights Act's "preclearance" formula had already taken steps to restricting voting. Officials in states like Texas, Alabama and North Carolina flew like "gleeful children released from detention" to their respective statehouses to fully gerrymander their districts and pass voting restrictions that just happen to most affect black and brown folks -- cuts in early balloting, the end of same-day registration and Sunday voting before Election Day. But we shouldn't be surprised. This is par for the course in the land of the free and home of the brave.

Somehow the election of a black president has made us all equal. But African Americans still make far less money than whites, our unemployment rate is twice as high and the wealth gap between blacks and whites has increased, not closed. Our children go to overcrowded and underequipped schools, their parents are targeted by banks for higher interest rates, and the most exotic and toxic mortgages, and every one of us is more likely to be arrested for nonviolent crimes, more likely to be jailed if arrested, and more likely to serve time if tried.

The pattern of continuing discrimination whether in the legal system, educational system or monetary system is pervasive and impossible to overlook for anyone willing to open their eyes.

At this very moment we're debating whether a man who followed a 17-year-old home from a convenience store and then shot him dead on a neighbor's lawn is guilty of murder or just a concerned citizen well within his rights to stand his ground. And whether or not a woman accused of telling employees she would really love to have "a bunch of little niggers to wear long-sleeve white shirts, black shorts and black bow ties" to complete a "southern plantation wedding" is racist or not.

We are African, and we happened to be in America. We are not American. We are people who formerly were Africans who were kidnapped and brought to America. Our forefathers weren't the pilgrims. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock. The rock was landed on us. We were brought here against our will. We were not brought here to be made citizens. At least that's how Malcolm X saw it. Those are his words, but every year when the fit starts to hit the shan, they get me thinking.

When the Founding Fathers of this great nation proudly adopted the Declaration of Independence, they conveniently left our people out. When Thomas Jefferson wrote in indelible black ink, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," I have to wonder how he could go back to his slave plantation and live with himself.

Recognizing this abject hypocrisy, English abolitionist Thomas Day wrote in a 1776 letter, "If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves."

More simply, my high school African-American History teacher used to say, "It wasn't our independence day."

Despite the great virtues espoused in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the fact that they were created in a time when we were slaves, in a time when becoming three-fifths of a human was an upgrade makes the documents' supposed sanctity a bit hard to swallow.

How do we deal with this conflict as black people? How do we, the descendants of people who were forcibly taken from their homeland, inured in centuries of dehumanizing servitude and denied the basic dignity that should be afforded to every living being, come together on a day to celebrate the founding and creation of the very country responsible for such treatment?

While it seems that the majority of America celebrates the past and the present, as African-Americans we celebrate the future. We have to. It's been our interminable optimism that has gotten us through the perpetual suffering and sadness that is our American history. We don't celebrate and honor the horror of the past. We celebrate the fact that we were able to survive and persist and make a better future for our children.

It's even in the words of the black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing":

"Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way  
that with tears has been watered.  
We have come, treading our path  
thro' the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from a gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam  
of our bright star is cast."

More than anything else, that song illustrates what it means to be black in America. It means that you have to reconcile the torrid and often abhorrent issues of the past and the lingering inadequacy of the present with a continued hope for the future. But that struggle and conflict is not exclusive to African-Americans. A history fraught with indignity is the story of every group that comes to America.

The Puritans who came and settled this country were fleeing religious persecution. The people they met when they came, the Native Americans, were run off their land and slaughtered to the point that they exist now almost exclusively in fractions of a percentage in cities or on so-called reservations. The first and second wave of Irish, Italian, Jewish and other European immigrants were literally treated like animals, spat on and shunned when they first arrived here. And of course, there was the horrific treatment of the Chinese immigrants who built the railroads that allowed Americans to crisscross the country in a way they had never done before.

We are not alone in our struggle and many ethnic groups still face struggles against bigotry, hostility and outright racism to this day.

But what we celebrate on the Fourth of July isn't the idea that America was perfect or that it is perfect; we celebrate the idea that America can be perfect. Despite all its failings and shortcomings, when the Founding Fathers created the Constitution they created a country that has given us almost limitless potential for change and for improvement.

As African Americans, our freedom was not given to us on July 4, 1776, but nobody's freedom was. The Declaration of Independence was just that, a declaration. Freedom in this country isn't something that's given to you by a declaration; it's something you fight for. Then, as now, a declaration was just the beginning. The framers knew that signing a letter wouldn't grant them their freedom from England, so they fought. They fought and died in a war that featured a number of African Americans who, even then, believed in the power and importance of the country that we call home.

The war for independence is one that black folks are still fighting today. So many of our people are free from the physical shackles of legalized slavery, but have yet to be freed from mental slavery. For us, perhaps, Independence Day is less a celebration of independence achieved and more a recognition of just how far our struggle has come. On the Fourth of July we celebrate what we've endured, what we've accomplished and how much further we can still go.

Power concedes nothing without a demand. This is what our America has always been, a land littered with uncertainty and unfairness, but one that affords us immeasurable and unparalleled opportunity to be our greatest selves. And that is perhaps as it should be, because our indelible struggle has manifested our inimitable identity.

Facing the rising sun of a new day begun, let us march on 'til victory is won.