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An Analysis of the Declaration of Independence

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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Abstract

The language and syntax of the Declaration of Independence creates a flexibility that allows the opportunity for the document to apply to other situations through its appeal to the human condition and fundamental nature of mankind. It serves as a powerful assertion that transcends time and place because its concepts reflect those lasting desires relevant still in modern history. The Declaration has influenced many groups in their resistance against oppressors including French revolutionaries in 1789, disenfranchised American women in 1848, and Vietnamese colonists in 1945. The language of the documents created during these struggles echoes that of the American Declaration demonstrating the eternal nature of this work. The purpose of this paper is to show the lasting impact of the Declaration in relation to the aforementioned political movements; demonstrating the relevance and power of this document 200 years after its conception.

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Part One

An Analysis of the Declaration of Independence

In 1776 British colonists in America revolted against King George III insisting he had violated their natural rights. The document describing these rights and the King's violations was titled the Declaration of Independence and has become one of the most cited documents in movements, rebellions, and revolutions since. The timeless character of the document can be attributed to the ambiguity and elastic nature of its language. Its influence spans over many decades and nations. The Declaration has inspired many peoples to assert independence from oppressive masters and declare to the world that all men are created equal. It is truly astonishing that a document written over 250 years ago can still hold relevance in a contemporary society yet the words of the Declaration are as relevant today as they were in 1776. The Thirteen United States of America, as they named themselves in the official document issued to the King, sought to define liberty, freedom, and equality as they saw them. They wanted economic and political autonomy from King George and his British Empire. These concepts are lasting desires relevant in modern history. Its syntax and language create a flexibility that allows the opportunity for the document to apply to other situations through its appeal to the human condition and fundamental nature of mankind. It served as a powerful assertion that transcends time and place. The French Revolution of 1789 but more contemporary movements such as Vietnamese Independence in 1945 and the American Women's Suffrage Movement serve as proof of the inspiration the document provides.

In order to better understand the influence of the Declaration of Independence, it must be defined what a "declaration" is. Historically, declaration meant "a public document issued by a

representative body.” Legally, it is a “form in which the plaintiff [in a civil trial] sets forth his cause of complaint at length.” In diplomacy, a declaration is a “formal international announcement by an official body, either by a general manifesto published to all the world; or by a note to each particular court, delivered by an ambassador.”¹ These definitions begin to provide a clearer understanding of the intent behind the document. The Declaration as an international manifesto was not a novel concept but rather the assertions and accusations it presented were extraordinary. The writers of the Declaration (mainly Thomas Jefferson who drew on contemporary works: his preamble for the Virginia State Constitution, George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights, and the Lee Resolution of Independence) knew what the consequences of its issuance would be.² The Continental Congress knew that the world was watching and the attention was desired. The phrase “let facts be submitted to a candid world” serves as clear evidence of the awareness of international attention declaring independence would bring to the United States.³ Therefore, to define the Declaration of Independence it can be assumed that it was a document publically and internationally issued to announce the crimes of King George III and assert the sovereignty of the thirteen United States.

The language of the Declaration was deliberately selected in order to allow for it to hold relevance in different situations and times as well as to appeal to mass audiences. Historian David Armitage argues that the perhaps most widely used line from the document- “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal”- had no practical use in the colonies separation from Great Britain.⁴ Armitage suggests that the statement was included for future use. The statement holds significance in future movements but in 1776, the colonists were British subjects and legally, were as equal as those British subjects living in the British isles and as such would have no need to establish equality. The colonists had been living as an independent state

from Britain for two years.⁵ Perhaps the Declaration only served as an official announcement of separation as opposed to a spur of the moment passionate statement of division. Natural rights are mentioned but they are not explained because as Jefferson wrote, they were self-evident and an explanation of them was unnecessary. The Declaration says that men are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” presupposing that even King George was not above the power of the Creator and the gifts he ordained on his children.⁶ The rights of man are natural but the three included are only *among* them insinuating the list extends beyond what is included. The ambiguity allows for the list of natural rights to be augmented in future discussions and for the rights that are listed to be defined as necessary in future interpretations. Also, claiming that the rights mentioned were natural implies that the acts of the King were unnatural, invoking the sense of right and wrong and pitting the American colonists against the British crown. The acts of the King being unnatural implies that monarchy itself was not natural, an abomination of sorts, and unnecessary.

English political economist Arthur Young, only four years prior to July 1776 wrote that “liberty is the natural birthright of mankind and yet to take a comprehensive view of the world, how few enjoy it.”⁷ His statement illustrates how liberty and freedom were at odds with one another. Liberty creates opportunity but equality hinders it. Liberty allows for people to obtain an education, to be trained in a profession of their choice, to live where they choose, to spend their earnings how they deem fit, and it creates different levels in society based on success of people in exercising the opportunity liberty created. Yet, equality prevents total liberty. Equality does not allow for any one person to be better than another despite the fact that one person may excel at one task while a second person does not, true equality denies the excellent person from

claiming their superiority at the task. Jefferson listed liberty as a natural right but equality was not, instead equality was a self evident truth. Truths can be disputed and denied because they are of man, natural rights are given by a greater power and to deny them would be to deny the natural order as God intended it to be.

In his second treatise on government, John Locke rhetorically questions “how much better [a monarchy] is than the state of nature where one man commanding a multitude has the liberty to be judge in his own case and may do to all his subjects whatever he pleases without the least liberty to anyone to question or control those who execute his pleasure.”⁸The contempt Locke holds for monarchies echoes in Jefferson’s treatment of George III in the Declaration. The list of “injuries and usurpations” Jefferson makes addresses the ways in which the King attempted to establish his tyranny over the colonists. Jefferson’s list seems to be Locke’s fears come to fruition. According to the Declaration, the King paid no mind to the rights and wishes of his subjects but rather made decisions in order to further his desires and interests thus committing the crime Locke cited as the reason people form governments- to protect themselves from “confusion and disorder” that follows men being the judge in their own case or punishing others too callously.⁹ The list of the King’s transgressions begins with specific acts of King George III but it crescendos into a purposefully unspecific list of allegations so as to allow it to apply to other situations and hopefully inspire other British colonies to rise against their tyrannical mother state because they would read the crimes and recognize the faults in their own governments.¹⁰ The Americans charged George III with several crimes among them his refusal to “assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good...for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments... abdicat[ing] government here, by declaring us out of his protection and waging

war against us...[for] plunder[ing] our seas, ravag[ing] our Coasts, burn[ing] our towns, and destroy[ing] the lives of our people.”¹¹ The accusations did not stop at the King, the Declaration also references those they considered their “British brethren” and finds them guilty of being “deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.”¹² This phrase was the result of carefully selected words and a largely redacted version of Jefferson’s accusations in order to not offend those British citizens who were sympathetic to the American struggle for independence.¹³

The deliberate vagueness of the language can also be found when it is stated that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive...it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute new government laying its foundation on such principles.”¹⁴ The elusiveness of this statement is great but at the same time, the statement can be seen as specific. It is specific in terms of the situation it poses, being that of a political struggle rather than an ethical or cultural one. Yet, it can apply to a variety of states at a variety of times because of the use of “*any* form of government” and “the right of the *people*.” These phrases suggest that any state, be it tyrannical or democratic is temporary and conditional based on its citizens opinions. Governments are made by people in order to, at the most fundamental level, provide them with security. It is when the government becomes a greater threat to their security than it is a provider of security that it becomes necessary for the people to abolish such a government. The divineness of leadership therefore became obsolete, dissolving centuries old claims to power and establishing an unlisted natural right of man, the right to participation and a voice in one’s government in the interest of their security. The Declaration holds the power to appeal to people domestically at the time but also abroad.

The struggle that followed the issuance of the Declaration was an economic battle which the American states had every intention of winning. The independence and freedom they sought

was mostly on an economic level because they already exercised political freedom from Britain. Without political freedom, the colonists would not have been able to demand economic independence. The economic struggle as the colonists saw it is made clear in the list of the King's transgressions when it is stated that the King was guilty of "cutting off our trade with all parts of the world, for imposing taxes on us without our consent" as well as in the conclusion of the document when it is said 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."¹⁵ As an independent state, the United States would have freedom to exercise their right as a state to, among other things, practice commerce as they wish. The infringement of a state's economic freedom could be viewed as grounds for warfare so in declaring their autonomy as a state, the United States hoped that their economic interests would be protected and in their own control. As it was, the American colonies were the main source of resources for a barren Britain and all British control centered on ensuring profits from the Americas reached the Crown. While the document in several ways was a manifesto of human rights and the role of government in its citizen's lives, its intended purpose of economic freedom from England's greedy hand announces its presence in smooth undertones. The Declaration's call for individual rights hid the heavier call for states rights and autonomy.

This fact cannot diminish the importance of the individual rights the Declaration advocates. The motives of the men were mixed as motives in many situations tend to be and the fact that money was a factor does not discredit the character of those men in the Continental Congress. Those men that signed the Declaration were risking everything they owned and their lives, the act of valor was a demonstration of their confidence in the principles set forth in the document. To prove they knew the risks they were taking, they mutually pledged their "lives,

fortunes, and sacred honor” and signed their names beneath that pledge demonstrating their understanding of their actions.¹⁶

According to 19th century American politician, Peleg Sprague, the individual rights mentioned in the Declaration were to inform a “whole people, of what before existed, and will always exist, the native equality of the human race, as the true foundation of all political, of all human institutions.”¹⁷ The invocation of equality was necessary and influenced the thirteen new states in the drafting of their new state Constitutions and Bill of Rights. This can be attributed to two reasons. First, the men writing the state Constitutions were the same men who had either written the Declaration or revised and edited it so naturally similarities would exist. The second reason being that many of the states believed in equality, an ideal that could be traced back to religious values and Enlightenment influences, especially in the New England states. The Virginia State Declaration of 1776 stated that “all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights,” the Pennsylvania State Declaration of 1776 stated that “all men are born equally free and independent and have certain natural, inherent and inalienable rights” and the Massachusetts State Constitution of 1780 in its first sentence said that “all men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties.”¹⁸ Individual rights were immediately accepted by the states as a central part of the new government they were consenting to become a part of by signing the Declaration of Independence. Wealth alone was not enough to risk dying for, but equality and individual rights that were natural and therefore irrevocable were principles worth the risk of death.

The version of the Declaration that is preserved today is the final version that was ratified and passed by the Continental Congress in 1776. The process used by the members of the

Continental Congress serves as the first example of the British colonies cooperating as the United States in an internationally official political capacity. Thomas Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration was revised and edited by the other members of the Continental Congress in order to create a document all parties agreed on. This goal required compromise and can also account for the vague language of the document, but it also accounts for the elasticity of the language as well. In large groups it is difficult if not impossible to grant the exact wishes of each member, compromise allows for all members to be satisfied. In the Declaration compromise emerges as elastic language. In the opening paragraph the phrase "dissolve the political bands" is used, the choice to use this phrase demonstrates the elastic nature of the document.¹⁹ The suggestion of colonialism as a political band not only reduces the power of the King of England in theory but also suggests that all governments are merely bonds between the ruler and those being ruled. The term band indicates peoples or groups working together for a common outcome that separate once the outcome has been achieved. It does not include dominance of one group or persons over the other nor does it allude to non-mutual cooperation. The phrase as its written in the Declaration could apply to any variety of political affiliations in which the governed feel oppressed because it is not a specific identification of the colonial relationship between America and Great Britain.

Later in the document before the list of the King's injuries and usurpations, it is stated that it is the right of the people to "provide new guards for their future security."²⁰ This statement is not expanded upon, the type of guard to be provided is not explicitly mentioned, nor is what exactly constitutes security defined. Perhaps this is because the writers were unsure of the definitions or it is because not defining the terms would allow for the document to be ratified and signed by more representatives. Not defining the terms suggested that states would be able to

define these terms on their own as was fit for their particular population. After all, the colonies did not necessarily view themselves as a country but rather as a union of individual states fighting for a common purpose. Thus each state would provide for its future security in its own way so to define it in the Declaration would be unnecessary. Unclear selection of language provides a timeless nature to the Declaration and allows for more people and groups to relate to the document.

The Declaration was met with celebrations across the thirteen colonies. Alexander Hamilton, the man who had been charged with distributing the Declaration through the colonies made sure that it was read even in the rural countryside so all members of the new United States could hear it.²¹ The people metaphorically tore down the monarchy by attempting to erase any and all presence of the King in America. Historian Pauline Maier describes the fervor and actions of the people saying that “the kings arms or pictures of the King or the Crown on public buildings, coffeehouse and tavern signs, even in churches, were ripped down, trampled, torn, or otherwise broken to pieces, then consumed in great bonfires before crowds of people.”²² This shows that the American colonists fully supported the Declaration and the ramifications it was sure to bring. The domestic reception of the document was incredibly positive, an outcome the Congress had worked hard to obtain. Through extreme editing, the immensely controversial parts of Jefferson’s original draft were toned down (much to his dismay).²³ The two most controversial sections being that of the list of grievances towards the King and the passage referencing slavery.

The Southern states, in what would become habit, opposed Jefferson’s assault on the slave trade so much so that the entire section it was included in was eliminated from the final draft of the document.²⁴ In fact, the word slavery does not appear at all in the final draft of the Declaration.

Part 2

The Declaration of Independence as an Influence on the Declaration of the Rights of Man

The Declaration of Independence has had global influence to newly established governments since its drafting in 1776. In conjunction with the earlier Virginia Declaration of Rights, the Declaration of Independence serves as the inspiration for the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen). These documents helped to spread and institutionalize the concept that humankind has particular rights that no government may infringe upon in the eighteenth century. The ideas recorded in the documents were in some ways more revolutionary than the actions that were required to defend them. Rights as an entity that were not subject to the whims of one sovereign served as a great motivator to gain independence. The concept of natural rights reconciled social hierarchies and economic differences that had been the norm for generations. Having rights that were not subjective and that could not be taken away because they originated with a divine creator gave people power that they had never before possessed.

The similarities of the language in the documents is striking. Each document mentions natural rights, the role of government, and the duty of citizens. Additionally, each document uses several of the same words and phrases including “freedom”, “life”, “liberty”, “security”, and “happiness”. Through these key words the ideas that revolutionized the world of politics can be traced from one state to the next, one society to another. The rights in these documents “make up an eighteenth century documentary foundation on which two centuries of legal protection of human rights have come to be built, not only in the United States and France, but around the world.”²⁵ Moreover, the rights appeared at a time when advancements had been made in technological communication and allowed for the ideas written in the American Declaration of

Independence and news of the Revolution to be able to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and inspire change.

The language and concepts in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen resemble that of the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the American Declaration of Independence. Issued on August 26, 1789 the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was a radical document for eighteenth century France. At the time, “reference to the American documents was frequent; it acted as an indispensable guide or foil in the conception of their own principles.”²⁶ The influences of the American documents can be clearly seen in several phrases and concepts of the French example. To begin with, the French state that they have “set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man” and proceed to list those rights in a series of seventeen articles.²⁷ The first article seemingly echoes the American documents, it states that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”²⁸ Virginia’s Declaration of Rights, adopted by the Virginia Constitutional Convention on June 12, 1776, is a document listing the rights of citizens in Virginia in a series of sixteen sections, states in Section 1 that “all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights.”²⁹ The same idea is found in the Declaration of Independence, in perhaps one of the most famous lines ever written, “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.”³⁰ As discussed in the first part of this paper, the concept of natural rights came from John Locke’s Second Treatise on Government.

It is clear from these documents that Locke’s idea influenced people from its conception to 1789. Using natural rights as the basis to reject old forms of government and protest oppression was a tactic French representatives learned from the American example, however, they altered the language to fit their situation. This is evident in the listing of the rights in each

document. Life, liberty, means to acquire property, happiness, and security are the rights specifically listed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights. The list is almost identical in the Declaration of Independence, the “certain unalienable rights” Jefferson deemed most important were life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.³¹ In the French document different rights are included. The rights of liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression are listed in the French Declaration. Resistance to oppression as one’s duty is a thought included in the American Declaration but not explicitly deemed a right. Jefferson includes resistance as a duty of the Colonists in their relations to an oppressive, despotic monarch. Resistance becomes the duty of citizens when the government violates the rights God has given them. Jefferson makes rebellion against the British monarchy the duty of the people in order to justify revolution. The American colonists did not have to create a completely new government, they had been functionally politically independent of Britain previously.

The French did not have such a luxury. They had to recreate a new political system, economy, and society in the shadow of an old regime.³² The French Revolution was a “nationalistic affront to international stability” according to historian David Armitage.³³ The French rebellion was closer to home, that is to say instability in France threatened the stability of their neighboring nations ruled by absolute monarchs. The fear of France’s geographic neighbors was that the Revolution could easily leak through borders and spread unrest in other states. After all, the American Revolution was an ocean away and still inspired rebellion in France. In the French situation, resistance is not included as a duty of the citizen but rather a right of the people in an attempt to legalize their rebellion against the French crown in the same manner the Americans legalized their acts against the British crown. George Mason makes resistance a right in the Virginia Declaration of Rights as well. In Section 3 it is stated that “when any government

shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community has an indubitable, inalienable, and inalienable right to reform, alter or abolish it.”³⁴ This right to resist a corrupt and oppressive government is unquestionable and unyielding.

The French revolutionaries declared that all citizens were equal under the law, a dramatic shift from the rigid social hierarchy in France at the time. Strict social structure and economic crisis created tensions between the lower classes and the elite classes. French nobility were exempt from certain taxes that the peasant class had to pay. The majority of the nation was made up of the peasant class, working in cities or farming the land in rural areas. Peasants often were left with little to nothing left to survive on and were starving after the collection of taxes on behalf of the government of Louis XVI.³⁵ The unpopularity of the high taxes that only the peasants had to pay created unrest. The French had an interest in the American Revolution because of their rivalry with and desire to ruin Britain, leading to their alliance with the American colonists.³⁶ The financial aid provided to the American Revolutionary War also placed a strain on the French government that made a pre-existing financial problem worse and increased the struggle and anger of the lower classes. The economic problems and social inequality led to the call for the meeting of the French Representative body, the Estates General, to find a solution. Comprised of three parts, clergy, nobility, and the rest of the population, the third part had the largest body and the least amount of votes.³⁷ It would be this group of representatives who would break from the official Estates General and create a new representative governing body, the National Assembly, who issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Much like the American Congressional body, the National Assembly took it upon themselves to renounce the monarch that ruled over them and establish a new government in the

name of equality and liberty. The Assembly needed to rally the French people to their cause and hoped that by publishing translations of the American Declaration of Independence, no matter how accurate would inspire the people.³⁸ Perhaps the French were better able to identify with the American revolutionaries and their demand for control over their lives having first hand accounts of the struggle across the Atlantic due to their direct involvement in the war against the British and with some of the American founding fathers. The French Marquis de Lafayette was “the young hero of the American Revolution and the single most influential revolutionary leader [in France] in 1790.”³⁹ As a French military officer in the American Revolution fighting beside the American militiamen, Lafayette presumably had firsthand experience of the American patriotic spirit and struggle. Furthermore, from 1779 to 1788, John Adams was in Paris working on the peace treaty to end the war for Independence, searching for loans to help fund the war, and for recognition of the new nation on an international level (joined by Benjamin Franklin).⁴⁰ The interaction between the French and Americans suggests some of the French revolutionaries were personally able to identify with the American struggle.

France, as an enemy of Britain, help fund the colonies in their struggle against the British crown. It was this involvement that worsened an economic crisis and inspired a revolution in the same manner as their American counterparts. French involvement in the American revolution would also help explain the similarities in concepts in the founding documents. Identifying with the struggle of an ally led to reflection and the determination that the solution to the struggle was revolution. This realization is stated in the introduction of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. “The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments.”⁴¹ This is the root of the discussion of the role

of government. People became the source from which power flowed. Only through the consent of the people was it possible for governments to exist. This consent, made possible by the possession of natural rights, alters the role of government from the source of rights to the protector of pre-existing rights.

The Virginia Bill of Rights, Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the Declaration of Independence all suggest that the role of government is to protect the natural rights of citizens. In Section 3 of the Virginia Bill of Rights, it is written that “government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community.”⁴² In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson writes that people have inalienable rights and “that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men” furthering George Mason’s line of thought in the Virginia Bill of Rights.⁴³ Thirteen years later, the French National Assembly continues the idea in Article 2 when it states that “the aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptable rights of man.”⁴⁴ The French were influenced by the concept in the American documents that the role of government was to protect the rights of citizens and altered it slightly to fit to their specific situation. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen states that the preservation of rights is the aim of government, a goal to aspire to, but not the sole responsibility.

Part 3

Further Examples of the Impact of the Declaration of Independence

Section A- The Declaration of Sentiments

The American Women's Suffrage Movement serves as examples of the subsequent interpretation and application of the ideas put forth in the Declaration of Independence. Influenced by the language of the Declaration, specifically the phrase, "all men are created equal", American women founded their movement on the principles stated in the document. This is most clearly seen in the struggle for women's suffrage in the 1848 document titled "The Declaration of Sentiments" in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton re-wrote the original Declaration catering it to the specific situation.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, American women fought for legal rights equal to those of American men. Women were not allowed the full rights that were part of being an American citizen, including most importantly, the right to vote. Women had to fight a long battle to achieve the right to vote in the United States. In 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, women's rights activists met to discuss how to better the condition of women. It was at this meeting, led by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that the Declaration of Sentiments was created.

The Declaration of Sentiments is the Declaration of Independence re-written to clearly include women and list the ways in which man has disadvantaged women by those at the Seneca Falls Convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton eliminated and added words and phrases to the original Declaration in order to emphasize the meaning of the document. The Declaration of Sentiments states that instead of one people dissolving their political bands, it is necessary for

“one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied.”⁴⁵ The replacement of “one people” with “one portion of the family of man” makes the document more inclusive than the original. The Seneca Falls document also changes the phrase “all men are created equal” to “all men and women are created equal.”⁴⁶ Adding “and women” is an attempt to change the meaning of the phrase, to make it more inclusive but it also eliminates any chance of interpreting the new document as only applying to men as was the case with the original phrasing.

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson claims that George III was intentionally and systematically submitting violating the rights of the colonists. Stanton, in the Declaration of Sentiments, claims that American men committed “repeated injuries and usurpations... toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”⁴⁷ Jefferson discusses the King’s repeated injuries and usurpations in order to justify the colonists revolting against the crown. Stanton discuss men’s violations towards women in order to justify their argument that men and women are equal and deserve to be viewed that way in the eyes of the law. Following the model Jefferson created, the Declaration of Sentiments lists the usurpations of men towards women. Among these violations are men compelling women “to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice,” and men depriving women of the right to vote, property, wages, and education.⁴⁸ Jefferson accused the British king of using political means to hinder the colonists economically; Stanton accuses American men of using political means to hinder women in every aspect of life- politically, economically, socially, and psychologically. Stanton’s document copies the model created by Jefferson and expands upon it to include women specifically and all aspects of a woman’s life. However, the Declaration of Sentiments goes a step further than the standard set in the Declaration of Independence. Stanton not only lists the

sufferings women have endured at the hands of man historically but she creates a list of “resolutions” in order to advance the station of women.

At the end of her Declaration, Elizabeth Cady Stanton includes a section she labels “Resolutions.” In this portion of the Declaration, Stanton lists the ways women wish to change their station in life. Stanton establishes a fact crucial to the Movement in this portion of the document, she plainly and clearly states that:

“being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause...and this being a self evident truth growing out of the divinely implanted principles of human nature, any custom or authority adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind.”⁴⁹

The point Stanton is making is that Jefferson’s statement, “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal,” applies equally to men and women. Her argument being that the Creator endowed all humans with rights and made them equal to one another but man distorted that natural right. It also serves to connect the cause of the Women’s Rights Movement with the most basic premise of American political philosophy that people have natural rights that are not subject to government regulation or control.⁵⁰ By using almost identical language, Stanton makes the connection between the struggle of women and the struggle of the American colonists of 1776 stronger. She also uses the Declaration of Sentiments to point out the hypocrisy and failure of men. The Declaration of Independence recognizes the equality of all mankind, yet equality was denied to women and minorities. Stanton attempts to challenge the failure of men to live up to the ideals of equality stated in the Declaration of Independence.

Section B- The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence

Freedom, liberty, and human rights are words used in most political speech on the modern world stage. This can be attributed to the inspirational nature of the American Declaration of Independence. The language and ideas in the document are timeless and elastic, characteristics that make it easily applicable to other eras and places. The twentieth century world witnessed a dramatic shift in political powers. World War I and II, the Great Depression, revolutions as a consequence of decolonization, and universal human rights were all events that mark the century. For instance, the Vietnamese Revolution of 1945 highlighted features of the American Declaration in their fight for independence.

As was the case and common practice of many European nations for centuries, France colonized the small country known as Vietnam in the nineteenth century. They divided the country into three sections (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) with the expectation the division would make administration of the colony easier.⁵¹ French colonialism brought about drastic changes in Vietnamese society, culture, and politics.⁵² For instance, the French replaced the Vietnamese education system with French schools to indoctrinate young Vietnamese with Western ideals. However the ideology of Confucianism clashed with French attempts at westernization making it difficult for the French to control the Vietnamese intellectual class that spread “anticolonial, anti monarchical propoganda.”⁵³ Ho Chi Minh, who would become the leader of the Revolution in 1945 saw similarities between the struggle of the colonized Vietnamese and czarist Russia and was inspired to lead a communist revolution in his nation that he hoped would be as successful as the Russian example.⁵⁴ Despite the nature of the Revolution, Minh’s rhetoric resembled that of the American Declaration of Independence.

On September 2, 1945, two weeks after the Viet Minh took control of Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital, Ho Chi Minh delivered the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence. Ho Chi Minh may have orchestrated and led a communist revolution in Vietnam but his Declaration of Independence is full of American democratic ideas. In his declaration Minh cites both the American Declaration and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. He begins with the famous line “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.”⁵⁵ By beginning with this line, Minh establishes the rights of the oppressed and colonized Vietnamese in a similar manner to that with which Jefferson established the rights of the American colonists. Minh, ironically, next quotes the French Declaration saying “all men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.”⁵⁶ The fact that Minh includes the quote from the French Declaration is to point out the hypocrisy of France in their role as a colonizer. In 1789, France declared that all men were born free and equal, yet not even a century later they colonized Vietnam and oppressed its people with complete disregard for their freedom and rights.

The American document set the standard for which Ho Chi Minh bases his Declaration. Ho Chi Minh follows the outline established by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration, he lists the insurrections and violations of rights committed by the French imperialists against the Vietnamese colonists. Jefferson accuses George III of committing “a long train of abuses and usurpations” that invariably violated the colonist’s rights and then lists those violations.⁵⁷ Minh follows suit and says that the French “have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice” in their colonization and control of Vietnam.⁵⁸ These violations are the reasoning used to justify the insurrection of the colonists. Minh declares that the French “enforced inhuman laws..., built

more prisons than schools..., forced [the Vietnamese] to use opium and alcohol..., and reduced [the] people to a state of extreme poverty” among many other grievances.⁵⁹ Minh, like Jefferson, views the actions of the colonizing nation to be unjust and a process of intentional subjugation of the colonists.

The Vietnamese Declaration states that despite the French transgressions the Vietnamese people have continued to work towards positive relations with France. Minh says “notwithstanding all this, our fellow-citizens have always manifested toward the French a tolerant and humane attitude. Even after the Japanese putsch of March 1945, the Vietminh League helped many Frenchmen to cross the frontier, rescued some of them from Japanese jails, and protected French lives and property.”⁶⁰ Here Ho Chi Minh references the Japanese invasion of the nation that France was powerless to prevent during WWII. Minh believed this occupation to put the Vietnamese under a “double yoke of imperialism” that further violated the freedoms and rights of the people.⁶¹ Minh’s pointing out the continued cooperation of the Vietnamese with the French is not unlike Jefferson’s mentioning the appeal of the American colonists to their “British brethren...[through] ties of common kindred to disavow these usurpations.”⁶² In both instances, the writer seeks to convey the message that they are the victim and have continuously attempted to reconcile the situation despite constantly being harmed.

Furthermore, Minh concludes his Declaration in a similar manner to the American Declaration of Independence. The American Declaration begins its conclusion by stating:

“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.”⁶³

The conclusion of the Vietnamese Declaration begins with:

“for these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligation that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland.”⁶⁴

With this statement Minh effectively releases Vietnam from their forced allegiance to France under the premise that the decision was made by the Vietnamese people to further their best interest. The resemblance of Minh’s Declaration to the American Declaration is striking. Both feature a unique list of grievances against the colonizing power to justify the rebellion of the colonists. The Vietnamese Declaration quotes the American Declaration, follows the structure of the document and echoes its closing statement. This can be viewed as a political tactic on the part of Minh to associate Vietnam with the United States hoping that the reflection of American ideology would gain empathy and support for his nation by placing Vietnam in the presence of a larger revolutionary tradition.⁶⁵ Ho Chi Minh’s Declaration of Independence was intended to be used as propoganda in order to further his political agenda. Minh’s Declaration, like Stanton’s Declaration of Sentiments makes the attempt to gain empathy by using similar language in order to make a connection to Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Jefferson and his fellow founding fathers of the United States of America had no way to know that their ideas and actions would inspire change domestically and internationally for centuries afetrward. The Declaration of Independence is one of the most beautifully written documents because of the principles it established. It was a revolutionary and politically charged declaration that people are not subject the ever changing whims of government and have rights that are natural and untouchable by government. The Declaration

provides a foundation for citizen's who belief that their government is no longer protecting their rights to protest the violations.

The concepts presented in the document have inspired many movements and revolutions since its original distribution in 1776. In 1789, it influenced French intellectuals to denounce their monarch and establish a form of a republic. The 1789 Revolutionaries wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which gave the French people a power they had never before had. The American Declaration of Independence inspired Elizabeth Cady Stanton to write a Declaration of Sentiments at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Nearly identical to Jefferson's Declaration, Stanton intentionally used similar language in order to make the connection between the struggle of American women against domestic expectations and violations of women's rights by men and the struggle of American colonists and the violation of rights by the British crown. Lastly, in 1945 at the conclusion of World War II, the Vietnamese rebels led by Ho Chi Minh fought a revolution in order to take back control of their nation from a colonizing power. To inspire the people and encourage domestic and international support, Ho Chi Minh delivered a speech modeled after the American Declaration of Independence that relates the subjugation of American colonists to the wrongs suffered by the Vietnamese at the hand of imperial France. Minh used his Declaration as a form of propoganda. Stanton used her Declaration as a vehicle for change. The French rebels used their Declaration as a rejection of absolutist monarchy. It is astonishing the impact that 1,332 words and 56 signatures can have on the course of human history. In hindsight, the 1776 document was the offical forum for the American colonists to stage treason against the British crown. The Declaration of Independence serves as a reminder that a small group of people can make drastic change in the interest of preserving their safety and happiness.

It comes as no surprise that the Declaration of Independence has influenced people and nations across time and place. The language of the document is beautiful and inspiring. The statement that equality is a universal right belonging to all people offers hope, to those oppressed or suffering, that change is possible. The words of the Declaration are timeless and transcend the human condition attractive to those suffering injustices no matter when or where the injustice occurs. These characteristics make the Declaration of Independence appealing and help to explain why the document has been quoted and copied by various groups since its initial distribution in 1776. The document is an immortal declaration to oppressive and unjust leaders and governments in any time or place that “these truths are self evident, that all men [and women] 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” and no longer will those suffering idly stand by and let those rights be violated.

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- ¹ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 31.
- ² Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 48.
- ³ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans*, ed. Mia Bay, Waldo E. Martin Jr., Deborah Gray White, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013), A-1.
- ⁴ Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 26.
- ⁵ Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 33.
- ⁶ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ⁷ Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 52.
- ⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 8.
- ⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 8.
- ¹⁰ Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 53.
- ¹¹ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ¹² “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ¹³ Don Nardo, *The Declaration of Independence: A Model for Individual Rights* (San Diego, California: Lucent Books, 1999), 58.
- ¹⁴ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ¹⁵ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ¹⁶ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ¹⁷ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Random House Inc., 1997), 191
- ¹⁸ Maier, *American Scripture*, 166
- ¹⁹ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ²⁰ “The Declaration of Independence,” in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.
- ²¹ Maier, *American Scripture*, 159.
- ²² Maier, *American Scripture*, 157.
- ²³ Nardo, *The Declaration of Independence*, 61.
- ²⁴ Nardo, *The Declaration of Independence*, 59.
- ²⁵ Mark W. Janis, The Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the Bill of Rights, *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4, November 1992, Johns Hopkins University Press, 483.
- ²⁶ Elise Marienstras and Naomi Wulf, French translations and Reception of the Declaration of Independence, the *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 4, March 1999, Organization of American Historians, 1303.
- ²⁷ Dec of rights of man and citizen
- ²⁸ ibid
- ²⁹ George Mason, Virginia declaration of rights
- ³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence
- ³¹ Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence
- ³² Elise Marienstras and Naomi Wulf, French translations and Reception of the Declaration of Independence, the *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 4, March 1999, Organization of American Historians, 1311.
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- ³⁵ William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, oxford university press, oxford university press inc. new york usa, 1999, 148-157.
- ³⁶ Elise Marienstras and Naomi Wulf, French translations and Reception of the Declaration of Independence, the *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 4, March 1999, Organization of American Historians, 1302.
- ³⁷ Doyle 157.
- ³⁸ Elise Marienstras and Naomi Wulf, French translations and Reception of the Declaration of Independence, the *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 4, March 1999, Organization of American Historians, 1306.
- ³⁹ Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003), 39.
- ⁴⁰ Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, (Random House: New York, 2000), 165.
- ⁴¹ Declaration of the rights of man and citizen
- ⁴² George Mason, Virginia Declaration of Rights
- ⁴³ Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence

⁴⁴ Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments," 1848, in *Through Women's Eyes*, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois and Lynn Dumenil (Boston:Bedford/St. Martins, 2012), A-2.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., A3.

⁵⁰ Ellen Carol Dubois, "Seneca Falls Goes Public," *The Public Historian*, (Spring, 1999), 5.

⁵¹ Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75*, (UCL Press: London, 1998), 1.

⁵² Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, (Harvard Univeristy Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), 11.

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ruane, *War and Revolution*, 2.

⁵⁵ Vietnamese Declaration

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "The Declaration of Independence," in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.

⁵⁸ Vietnamese declaration

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ruane, *War and Revolution*, 8.

⁶² "The Declaration of Independence," in *Freedom on My Mind*, A-1.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Vietnamese Declaration

⁶⁵ David Armitage, "The Declaration of Independence in World Context," in *OAH Magazine of History*, (Organization of American Historians: April, 2004), 63.

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