

“THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE”

WEEK 2 — THOMAS G. WEST  PAUL AND DAWN POTTER PROFESSOR IN POLITICS

THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING is located in the enduring political principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. The meaning of these principles, especially equality, is decisively different than the definition given to those principles by modern progressivism.

LECTURE SUMMARY

Liberty is the right to be free from the coercive interference of other people. It is derived from nature itself, and is a natural right—something possessed simply because one is a human being,

Equality means no one is by nature the ruler of any other person. Each human being is equal in his right to life, liberty, and property, which the Declaration calls “the pursuit of happiness.”

Equality, liberty, and natural rights require a certain form of government: republicanism, based on consent of the governed. Legitimate government, based on the consent of the governed, must accomplish three things: the establishment of civil laws that protect man’s natural rights; the punishment of those who infringe on others’ natural rights; and the protection of natural rights through a strong national defense.

The people themselves also play a vital role in protecting their rights. They must be educated in “religion, morality, and knowledge.”

Modern liberalism uses the same language of “liberty” and “equality” as the Declaration of Independence. Yet modern liberals mean something other than what the Founders meant by those words. For the Progressives, “equality” means equal access to resources and wealth, while “liberty” means the ability to utilize a right, rather than the right in itself. Both of these ideas necessitate government programs that help mankind liberate itself from its “natural limitations.”

The Declaration of Independence and modern Progressivism are fundamentally opposed to each other. The modern misunderstanding of “equality” and “liberty” threatens not just the Declaration of Independence, but the whole of the American constitutional and moral order.

KEY PASSAGES FROM THE READINGS

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

“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...” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 5)

LETTER TO HENRY LEE ~ Thomas Jefferson

“This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the occasion.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 11)

AN ELECTION SERMON ~ Gad Hitchcock

“In a state of nature men are equal, exactly on a par in regard to authority: each one is a law to himself, having the law of God, the sole rule of conduct, written on his heart.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 94)

COMMON SENSE ~ Thomas Paine

“For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other law-giver; but that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender up a part of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 99)

VIRGINIA DECLARATION OF RIGHTS ~ George Mason

“That no free Government, or the blessing of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 117)

“That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 115)

THE NORTHWEST ORDINANCE

“Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 125)

ANNUAL MESSAGE TO CONGRESS ~ *Franklin D. Roosevelt*

“We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 745)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the source of rights, according to the Declaration of Independence?
2. What is the state of nature?
3. Why is consent of the governed a requirement for just government?
4. According to the Declaration of Independence, why are “governments instituted among men”?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is education necessary for the existence of free government? What kind of education is required for a free society?
2. Why is the modern definition of equality incompatible with the Declaration’s definition? How has this new definition of equality, as well as the new definition of liberty, aided the growth of government?
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt said that “Necessitous men are not free men.” What did he mean by that? Do you agree with his statement?



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