

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY:**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 ONLINE



PHOTO: 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. Above, Albanians celebrate in Vienna, Austria, after Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci read out the draft of the declaration of independence. *European Pressphoto Agency*

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."

Dr. Armitage is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History at Harvard University and the author of "The Declaration of Independence: A Global History" (2007) and "Foundations of Modern International Thought" (2013). An earlier version of this essay was published by the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History.

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►► **According to Dr. Armitage's article, in what ways did the U.S. Declaration have a *global impact*?**