



Eight Simple Words

'We hold these truths to be self-evident...' Of all the words in the Declaration of Independence, those are the ones that really sink home with me. If ever there was an example of brilliantly understated eloquence, this is it. But, in the rush to get to what they consider to be the meat of the message, most people hurry past that simple phrase without pausing to consider its meaning.

To me, those eight simple words speak volumes. They lay the groundwork for everything that comes after. The signers were proclaiming to King George III, and to the world, that the principles outlined in their declaration were so blindingly obvious that they required no justification or proof. *'...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.'*

In an early draft of the declaration, Thomas Jefferson substituted the words *'sacred and undeniable'* for *'self-evident.'* In my opinion, the change in language was more poetic than substantive. The signers were making it plain that the words to follow were so clearly true that no rational person could possibly disagree.

Was it just political rhetoric? Or did the signers of the Declaration really mean what they were saying? *Are* men inherently endowed with certain rights? Are freedom, self-determination, and self-government the natural rights of all human beings?

The Founding Fathers struggled over those questions, *long* after their battle for independence was won. Our Constitution was signed in 1787, but slavery and involuntary servitude remained legal practices in the United States until the Thirteenth Amendment was formally ratified in 1865, at the end of the Civil War. Despite the noble intentions of the men who founded our nation, it took eighty-nine years to outlaw the practice of owning human beings as property in this country. It took another five years to guarantee men of all races the right to vote and exercise self government. It took still another *fifty* years to extend those rights to women

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with the Nineteenth Constitutional Amendment. In a nation that was founded upon the ideal of personal liberty, it took nearly a century and a half to guarantee freedom and self determination to every one of our citizens.

There are those who will point to the timeline of Human Rights in America as a sign that the dream of liberty failed at the start. I could not possibly disagree more. I see our struggles as proof that freedom is a living thing — growing and evolving as the minds and hearts of humans grow and evolve. A tiny dream that began with a select group of men has spread to encompass a nation of nearly three-hundred million people.

I'm not suggesting that the transformation is complete in our country. Until we're free from injustices and inequalities, liberty will have plenty of room to grow in the United States. But I have every confidence that it will do so. Despite occasional detours and setbacks, the general trend in the U.S. has been toward freedom rather than away from it, almost from the outset.

What about the rest of the world? Freedom has taken root in other nations, sometimes with our assistance, and sometimes without. But it's still not nearly as common as most Americans would like to believe. Only about a third of the human race currently enjoys most of the basic rights and protections guaranteed to American citizens. In other words, two out of three people on this planet are *not* entitled to due process, the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom against unreasonable search and seizure, or the right to assemble.

To hear some people tell it, that's not really any of our business. We should attend to our own affairs and leave the rest of the world alone. Maybe they're right. Maybe we should keep our eyes focused inside our own borders and let the rest of mankind solve its own problems.

But, in my mind, that calls back the question raised by the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Are these truths *really* self-evident? Do human beings *really* have the right to be free?

Let's assume for a second that the answer is *no*. Let's stipulate, for the sake of argument, that freedom is the luxury of a privileged few, rather than an inalienable birthright of all people. If that's the case, then the current state of human rights in this world may well be perfectly ethical. Perhaps some of us are *supposed* to enjoy the fruits of liberty while others languish in servitude or oppression.

If we accept that as a premise, then all that remains is to devise a reliable means of determining who is entitled to freedom, and who is not. What can we use as a suitable criteria? Money? Could we perhaps establish a threshold of income? Everyone above the line enjoys freedom, and everyone below it does without. Or perhaps we should consider genetics, or race. No one thought much of that idea when the Nazis tried it, but maybe there's a better way to implement it. It might be simplest to leave the decision to geography and chance. If you're fortunate enough to be born in the right country, you're in the club. Otherwise you're out of luck.

Those all sound like fairly dumb ideas to me, despite the fact that they've all been tried. Unfortunately, I can't think of any good method of distinguishing free humans from non-free



humans. I'm not saying that it isn't possible. There may be a perfectly reasonable and equitable method for drawing the boundaries between the free and the oppressed.

Okay... confession time. That last bit was an outright lie. I don't believe there can ever be a reasonable or equitable mechanism for depriving human beings of liberty. Perhaps it's just the arrogance of an American citizen speaking, but I believe that the signers of the Declaration of Independence hit the nail on the proverbial head. These truths *ARE* self-evident. Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness *ARE* the inalienable rights of all human beings.

And, if I am correct in that belief, then there *are* no legitimate criteria for depriving human beings of liberty. And that means that all supposed criteria are illegitimate by definition. Geography, race, money, and politics are all irrelevant.

It is the ethical responsibility of all free men and all free women to carry the torch of liberty into places of darkness. That's *my* declaration. I couldn't say it in eight words, and I have no illusions that my thoughts belong on the same page with those of Thomas Jefferson. I'm just a retired Navy Chief, an American, and a lover of freedom. Nevertheless, I stand by my declaration. And I hold this truth to be self-evident.

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