

THE AMERICANS WHO RISKED EVERYTHING: THE SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On July 4, 2018, our nation celebrated the 242nd anniversary of the signing in the Declaration of Independence, a document which is – even today – more than an inanimate relic of the past, this being said because it provides continuing definition and understanding of our Constitution. The duration of no other constitutional republic in the world comes close to our nation's duration. Why is that so? Answers may follow.

Unfortunately, there is not a clear general understanding of how America came to be founded and of the major tenets of our founding documents, the Declaration and the Constitution and, most importantly, their significance. Some understanding, however, of their significance can be obtained by reflecting on the state of the world during earlier times as revealed in comments of Rush Limbaugh who stated:

The story of humanity on planet Earth since the beginning of time has been one of bondage and base survival struggle. The vast majority of people who have lived did not know freedom or liberty. They did not have the right to own property, or the right to dissent, and they certainly didn't have economic opportunity. Most lived very hard times under tyranny, authoritarianism, dictatorship.

Humanity has always been dominated by rulers who govern by intimidation, punishment, brutality. The United States is the exception. America was founded on the premise that we are all created by God, we are all created equal, and we are all created yearning for freedom, the natural desire of the human spirit. This had never happened before.

The signers of the Declaration not only announced that this fledgling nation was separating itself from the crown and the reasons for doing so, they also provided in the Declaration, as former U. S. Attorney General Edwin Meese notes, "a philosophical basis for government that exercises legitimate power by 'the consent of the government' [the phrase used in the Declaration] and it defined the conditions of free people, whose rights and liberty are derived from their Creator.." Those provisions (and others) found expression in the Constitution, thus revealing connections between those two documents which continues today.

What is not generally known is the great sacrifice the signers – and often their families – experienced as the British military reacted to their act which was clearly treason. Consequently, to fill that void, excerpts from an essay written by Rush Limbaugh's father about their sacrifices are provided below in italics.

Although there is general acknowledgment that our form of government is successful, there is nevertheless concern, if not despair, about the survival of the nation, given the inroads made by the left (including educational institutions), socialists/communists, adherents of Islam and others in today's society. Two questions thus emerge: (1) will the sacrifice of the Founders be proven to have been made in vain? and (2) if the nation does not survive, will its destruction, if it occurs, come on our watch?

THE DECLARATION IS ADOPTED: AN ESSAY

The Adoption of the Declaration. *Congress transformed itself into a committee of the whole. The Declaration of Independence was read aloud once more, and debate resumed. A total of 86 alterations were made. Almost 500 words were eliminated, leaving 1,337. At last, after three days of wrangling, the document was put to a vote. Here in the hall Patrick Henry had once thundered: "I am no longer a Virginian, Sir, but an American." But today the loud, sometimes bitter argument stilled, and without fanfare the vote was taken from north to south by colonies, as was the custom. On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted.*

The Signers. *What kind of men were the 56 signers who adopted the Declaration of Independence and who, by their signing, committed an act of treason against the Crown? To each of you the names of Franklin, Adams, Hancock, and Jefferson are almost familiar as household words. Most of us, however, know nothing of the other signers. Who were they? What happened to them?*

I imagine that many of you are somewhat surprised at the names not there: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry. All were elsewhere.

Ben Franklin was the only really old man. Eighteen were under 40; three were in their 20s. Of the 56, almost half – 24 – were judges and lawyers. Eleven were merchants, 9 were landowners and farmers, and the remaining 12 were doctors, ministers, and politicians.

With only a few exceptions, such as Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, these were men of substantial property. All but two had families. The vast majority were men of education and standing in their communities. They had economic security as few men had in the 18th century. Each had more to lose from revolution than he had to gain by it.

These men knew what they risked. The penalty for treason was death by hanging. And remember: a great British fleet was already at anchor in New York harbor.

Even before the list [of signers] was published, the British marked down every member of Congress suspected of having put his name to treason. All of them became the objects of vicious manhunts. Some were taken. Some, like Jefferson, had narrow escapes. All who had property or families near British strongholds suffered.

Francis Lewis, New York delegate, saw his home plundered and his estates, in what is now Harlem, completely destroyed by British soldiers. Mrs. Lewis was captured and treated with great brutality. Though she was later exchanged for two British prisoners . . . she died from the effects of that abuse.

William Floyd, another New York delegate, was able to escape with his wife and children across Long Island Sound to Connecticut, where they lived as refugees without income for seven years. When they came home, they found a devastated ruin.

Phillip Livingston had all his great holdings in New York confiscated and his family driven out of their home. Livingston died in 1778 still working in Congress for the cause.

Louis Morris, the fourth New York delegate, saw all his timber, crops, and livestock taken. For seven years, he was barred from his home and family.

John Hart of Trenton, New Jersey, risked his life to return home to see his dying wife. Hessian soldiers rode after him, and he escaped in the woods. While his wife lay on her deathbed, the soldiers ruined his farm and wrecked his homestead. Hart, 65, slept in caves and woods as he was hunted across the countryside. When at long last, emaciated by hardship, he was able to sneak home, he found his wife had already been buried, and his 13 children taken away. He never saw them again. He died a broken man in 1779, without ever finding his family.

Thomas Lynch, Jr., South Carolina delegate, had his family broken from privation and exposures while serving as a company commander in the military. His doctors ordered him to seek cure in the West Indies and on the voyage he and his young bride were drowned at sea.

Thomas Nelson, signer of Virginia, was at the front in command of the Virginia military forces. With British General Charles Cornwallis in Yorktown, fire from 70 heavy American guns began to destroy Yorktown piece by piece. Lord Cornwallis and his staff moved their headquarters into Nelson's palatial home. While American cannonballs were making shambles of the town, the house of Governor Nelson remained untouched. Nelson turned in rage to the American gunners and asked, "Why do you spare my home?" They replied, "Sir, out of respect to you." Nelson cried, "Give me the cannon" and fired on his magnificent home himself, smashing it to bits. But Nelson's sacrifice was not quite over. He had raised \$2 million for the Revolutionary cause by pledging his own estates. When the loans came due, a newer peacetime Congress refused to honor them, and Nelson's property was forfeited. He was never reimbursed. He died, impoverished, a few years later at the age of 50.

And, finally, there is the New Jersey signer, Abraham Clark. He gave his two sons to the officer corps in the Revolutionary Army. They were captured and sent to the infamous British prison hulk afloat in New York harbor known as the hell ship "Jersey" where 11,000 Americans were to die. The younger Clarks were treated with a special brutality because of their father. One was put in solitary and given no food. With the end almost in sight, with the war almost won, no one could have blamed Abraham Clark for acceding to the British request when offered him his son's lives if he would recant and come out for the King and parliament. The utter despair in this man's heart, the anguish in his very soul, must reach out to each of us down through 200 years with his answer: "No!"

Of those 56 who signed the Declaration of Independence, nine died of wounds or hardships during the war. Five were captured and imprisoned, in each case with brutal treatment. Several lost wives, sons or entire families. One lost 13 children. Two wives were brutally treated. All were at one time or another the victims of manhunts and driven from their homes. Twelve signers had their homes completely burned. Seventeen lost everything they owned. Yet not one defected or went back on his pledged word. Their honor, and the nation they sacrificed so much to create, is still intact.

The 56 signers of the Declaration proved by their every deed that they made no idle boast when they composed the most magnificent curtain line in history: "**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.**"

SOME IMPORTANT PROVISIONS OF THE DECLARATION

Foreword. By now, there is a general understanding that the curricula of public schools and public universities do not provide an adequate understanding of how America came to be founded or of the main tenets of its founding documents. For example, a news article in the June 30, 2016 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* reports that "Students at the University of Texas at Austin . . . can partly fulfill their U. S. history requirement by signing up for *Jews in American Entertainment*." This would be consistent with some of the bizarre practices taking place at universities one can hear about.

Because there appears to have been limited opportunity for a person to gain at least some understanding about the founding of this nation, what follows is a brief discussion of two important subjects in the Declaration: Natural Law and the Source of Our Rights.

Natural Law. Natural law was a controlling influence on the founders and framers, and found expression in the Declaration through the use of such terms as "Laws of Nature" and "Nature's God." Note in this regard the following statement from the Declaration: "**When . . . it becomes necessary for one people . . . 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 . . .**" (emphasis added)

"Natural Law" is generally acknowledged as providing an intrinsic, built-in knowledge of what is right and wrong. The reader wishing more explanation of that term may find writings of Locke, Jefferson, Plato and others a bit abstract and difficult to understand; however, a clear and authoritative explanation is provided by Jurist William Blackstone whose *Commentaries* was the second most referenced document (following the Bible) used by the framers. Wrote Blackstone:

As man depends absolutely upon his Maker for everything, it is necessary that he should in all points conform to his Maker's will. This will of his Maker is called the law of nature . . . This law of nature, being coeval [coexistent] with mankind and dictated by God Himself is, of course, superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over the globe, in all countries, and at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this . . . Upon these two foundations, the law of nature and the law of revelation, depend all human laws; that is to say, no human laws should be suffered [permitted] to contradict these.

Natural Law is not merely a relic of the past. As many readers can recall, in the absence of any applicable written law, it was the charge "crimes against humanity," a charge based on Natural Law, which was used to convict and execute Nazi leaders after World War II.

Author Mark Alexander contends, "To better understand what is meant by 'the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God,' recall that our Declaration's signers were not of one mind on matters of theology and doctrine. They were Christians, Deists and Agnostics." Although they were of wildly differing views about such matters, they nevertheless had a similar view about one important matter identified by Thomas West, author of *The Political Theory of the Founding*, who stated: "In the founders' view, it is reasonable that the God who both revealed the Decalogue and is author of the natural world created that world with natural moral principles that accord with His law. The alternative – moral commands with no basis in, or that contradict nature – seemed to the founders profoundly irrational and implausible."

The Source of Our Right: God or Man? The Declaration states the following:

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 governemnd.

British writer G. K. Chesterton stated, "America is the only nation that is founded on creed [i.e., religious belief]. That creed is set forth . . . in the Declaration . . . It certainly does condemn . . . atheism, since it clearly names the Creator as the ultimate authority from whom these equal rights are derived."

Columnist Cal Thomas provides the following explanation: "The framers of the Constitution clearly understood that in order to put certain rights out of the reach of government, whose power, they wished to limit, those rights had to come from a place government could not reach . . . The only way to preserve them for ourselves and our posterity is to acknowledge they come from a higher place."

Communists and others, however, wish to eliminate religious influence from government. But note the following comment by columnist Jeffrey Kuhner:

Capitalism, private property, the nation-state and the traditional family – all rest upon the Judeo-Christian moral order. Marxists have understood one seminal truth: destroy a religion and you destroy the culture and civilization it spawned.

That is why modern liberals relentlessly advance the sexual revolution characterized by individual gratification, abortion on demand and birth control. Sexual permissiveness – the Godless libertine society – and not the international proletariat is the true agent of radical change.

In fact, the founder of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, deliberately promoted open marriage, abortion, birth control and militant secularism as a means of social engineering. For Lenin, religion was the enemy.

There has been open resistance from the left, Democrats and Liberals to the notion of rights being endowed by a Creator God. CNN journalist Chris Cuomo, in a program about President's Day, boldly asserted, "Our rights do not come from God. That's not our country. Our laws come from collective agreement and compromise." Resistance was further illustrated by President Obama, who had a history of deliberately omitting the words "endowed by their Creator" when discussing "rights" in various forums. Alexander makes the following contention which appears to be confirmed by the presently noted rampant corruption and abuse of power in Washington: "The history of man, since its first record, has repeatedly and tragically documented that when the people settle for the assertion that government is the source of their rights, tyranny is the inevitable result"