

**SIX IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES  
OF THE  
DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

**Laurel Riddle**

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**Dr. Spear**

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Drawing from their own experience and education in contemporary and classical thinking, the founding fathers created a document that has no equal in the world, the Declaration of Independence. This document distilled the thinking and ideas of many great minds into one unifying idea; men should be able to live and work and seek after the desires of their hearts unfettered by a tyrannical government. The principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence fanned the flames of the American Revolution as they were intended, but these principles continue to be fresh and contemporary and meaningful today. In the words of Martin Diamond, "The continuing importance of the Declaration of Independence lies in the principles by which it justified independence. That is, the Declaration grounded separation from Britain upon principles of government held to be valid for all men at all times."<sup>1</sup> This paper will outline six of these important principles.

"All men are created equal." This lofty phrase has come to mean many different things to people. In the context of the Declaration, this did not mean we all came to this earth with the same talents or possessions or privileges. John Adams spoke about equality:

"That all men are born to equal rights is true. Every being has a right to his own, as clear, as moral, as sacred as any other being has. This is as indubitable as a moral government in the universe. But to teach that all men are born with equal powers and faculties, to equal influence in society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people as ever was practiced by monks...by Brahmins...or by the self-styled philosophers of the French revolution. For honor's sake...for truth and virtue's sake, let American philosophers and politicians despise it."<sup>2</sup>

The equality of the Declaration is that we have all come from our Creator with something in common: our humanity. This humanity links us as reasoning individuals striving to reach our potential.<sup>3</sup>

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"(Men) are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This principle should not be confused as the right of men to *be* happy. These unalienable rights come only from man's Creator, not from governments, and cannot be taken away from him by government. This principle works on the assumption that our humanity qualifies us to govern ourselves.

"To grasp the peculiarly human and to uncover thereby the philosophy of man latent in the Declaration, one must first ask, *What kind of being is man that he, unlike all other creatures, should be endowed with those unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?* Surely, a being thus endowed must be potentially capable of governing himself without impairing the unalienable rights of others."<sup>4</sup>

This principle does not imply that men have the God-given right to do whatever they want whenever they want.

"That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men." Governments exist to ensure certain unalienable rights. The colonists, as Englishmen, demanded that the government allow them their rights; they were not satisfied in this demand; consequently, they rebelled.

"Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This is an idea John Locke espoused in his social contract theory. This principle is the basis for democracy, or government by the people; though, as we understand it today to be *all* people, "In Jefferson's day, the consent of the governed would certainly not have been meant as the consent of the whole population that was subject to government, but rather as the consent of those then regarded as qualified to participate in self-government."<sup>5</sup>

"That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it." Related to the previous principle, this one gives justification to change or even throw off the bands of a government which does not promote the stated purpose of government: to secure man's unalienable rights. This principle is not a blanket approval for revolution, but a reminder that government is formed for the benefit of man, not the reverse. The idea of fighting a war with a superpower nation must have been a frightening prospect for the fledgling colonies. Yet because of the principles they professed, the colonists forged ahead. John Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush in 1808 about the Revolution. He said, "Now sir, for your Groans. You and I in the Revolution acted from Principle, we did our Duty, as we then believed, according to our best Information, Judgment and Consciences. Shall we Now repent? This is impossible: how can a Man repent of his virtues?"<sup>6</sup> Revolution wasn't an attractive prospect, but a necessary one, according to this principle.

"To institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness." No form of government is suggested or implied in this principle. It is left to

the people to use their own experience and intellect to institute a government. This was a great change from the traditional or customary way governments came about. "Hitherto, governments owed their origin to force and accident (such as the accidents of birth and personality). They lacked *rational* foundations, foundations consistent with the laws of nature and of nature's God."<sup>7</sup> The requirement of government was that it would effect the safety and happiness of the people. This requirement would apply to any type of government instituted, not just the type later created by the Constitution, which is so familiar to us.

"Henceforth government is to be based primarily on *rational* and not *customary* foundations. Not immemorial tradition, not the authority of kings claiming divine sanction, but reason, God-given reason, whose light is available in *principle* to all mankind--this is the only legitimate foundation of government, and *the only justification for government by the consent of the governed.*<sup>8</sup>"

The six preceding principles make the Declaration of Independence a unique document that has inspired a government whose success is unequalled in the history of the world and a nation that is *the* superpower in the world. I believe that adherence to these principles in the context and meaning in which they were written is our challenge today in order to continue to enjoy the great blessings of liberty which are taken for granted so often by those of us who have always had them.

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**Endnotes** 1Martin Diamond, *The Democratic Republic*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co.) 1972, p. 3.

2Paul Eidelberg, *On the Silence of the Declaration of Independence* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) 1976, p. 73.

3Paul Eidelberg, *On the Silence of the Declaration of Independence*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) 1976, p.84-85.

4Ibid., p. 9.

5Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman, *The American Testament* (New York: Praeger Publishers) 1975, p. 46.

6David Freeman Hawke, *A Transaction of Free Men*. 1941. (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc.) 1988, p. 176.

7Paul Eidelberg, *On the Silence of the Declaration of Independence*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) 1976, p. 8.

8Paul Eidelberg, *On the Silence of the Declaration of Independence*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) 1976, p. 8.

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