

THE AUTHOR AND SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

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IT IS COMMON TO THINK of the Declaration of Independence as a highly speculative document; but no one can think so who has read it. It is a strong rhetorical statement of grievances against the English government. It does, indeed, open with the assertion that all men are equal and that they have certain inalienable rights, among them the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It asserts that governments were instituted to secure these rights, and can derive their just powers only from the consent of the governed; and it solemnly declares that “whenever any government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation in such principles, and organizing its powers in such forms, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” But such sentences do not afford a general theory of government to formulate policies upon. No doubt we are meant to have liberty; but each generation must form its own conception of what liberty is. No doubt we shall always wish to be given leave to pursue happiness as we will, but we are not yet sure where or by what means we shall find it. That we are free to adjust government to these ends we know; but Mr. Jefferson and his colleagues in the Continental Congress prescribed the law of adjustment for no generation but their own. They left us to say whether we thought the government they had set up was founded on “such principles,” its powers organized in “such forms” as seem to us most likely to effect our safety and happiness. They do not attempt to dictate the aims and objects of any generation but their own....

No one now needs to be told what the principle of the American Revolution was: it was the principle of individual liberty. Though the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were no theorists but practical statesmen, a very definite conception of what the government of enlightened men ought to be lay back of everything they did, and that conception they held with a passionate conviction. They believed government to be a means by which the individual could realize at once his responsibility and his freedom

Wilson, “The Author and Signers of the Declaration of Independence,” in Pestritto, *Wilson: Essential Political Writings*, pp. 97-105.

from unnecessary restraint. Government should guard his rights, but it must not undertake to exercise them for him....

So far as the Declaration of Independence was a theoretical document, that is its theory. Do we still hold it? Does the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence still live in our principles of action, in the things we do, in the purposes we applaud, in the measures we approve? It is not a question of piety. We are not bound to adhere to the doctrines held by the signers of the Declaration of Independence: we are as free as they were to make and unmake governments. We are not here to worship men or a document. But neither are we here to indulge in mere rhetorical and uncritical eulogy. Every Fourth of July should be a time for examining our standards, our purposes, for determining afresh what principles and what forms of power we think most likely to effect our safety and happiness. That and that alone is the obligation the Declaration lays upon us. It is no fetish; its words lay no compulsion upon the thought of any free man, but it was drawn by men who thought, and it obliges those who receive its benefits to think likewise...

