

Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence

A Document, Timely & Timeless

A Historical & Philosophical Appraisal

M. Andrew Holowchak

Series in American History



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*To my friend and compatriot in Jefferson-styled liberalism
—the Cap'n*

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Prologue

The thesis of this book, *Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, is that Jefferson's document is both timely and timeless. As theses go, that is rather white bread. It is certainly at least implicit in many writings on the Declaration of Independence: e.g., Dumas Malone's *The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (1954) and David Armitage's *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007). Yet given that so much ink continues to be spent on two key denunciatory theses—that Jefferson did not really write the Declaration and that the actual worth of the document pales when compared to its perceived worth—my thesis needs explicit expression, especially at this kairotic time.

Why is the Declaration timely and timeless?

The Declaration was motivated to express a particular need in its day in the Congress—to explain to the world at the time why the Colonies were at war with and separating from their mother country, England. Yet the warrant for that separation, through the capable and dexterous quill of Thomas Jefferson, was given, by appeal to nature, in terms of certain timeless truths, of which at the bedrock lay the expression of human equality, or so, I argue. The genius of Thomas Jefferson—who I maintain was the author and not just drafter of the Declaration—lay in the manner that he artfully sketched core principles of a liberal political philosophy, grounded on a moral philosophy, in his document that could morally justify political revolutions. That justification was governmental contravention of humans' natural equality, when governmental figures, placing themselves above natural law, were treating unequally the citizens they were meant to serve.

That point leads to the largest disclosure of this book, if my argument is cogent. The Declaration of Independence is axially and philosophically a document about human equality, for once we understand human equality, then we can grasp why all humans are deserving of liberty. Only then does the philosophical argument that drives the Colonists' push for independence and that shows the timelessness of Jefferson's document make sense. That argument I tease out by comparison of Jefferson's First Draft of his Declaration with the finished product.

I also expect that this book will prove to be timely and timeless. It cannot help but be timely, because it comes out just prior to July 4, 2026, which is the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 200th anniversary of the death of Thomas Jefferson, its author. I did not plan that when undertaking

this book. Sometimes, things just happen. It too will be (hopefully) timeless inasmuch as I anticipate that some, perhaps many, of the key claims that I make throughout the book will pass the critical test of time.

Why is there a need for another book on the Declaration of Independence?

To answer that question, I return to the final sentence of my opening paragraph.

Key book-length writings on the Declaration or on Jefferson's political thinking, some of the most important that have been written, that include large discussion of his Declaration by other scholars—e.g., Carl Becker, Gary Wills, Pauline Maier, Danielle Allen, and Leonard Levy—have left me either wanting more (Becker and Wills) or with a foul aftertaste (Levy, Wills, Maier, and Allen). And so, I crafted this book as a critical corrective. Its success will be determined by my analytic capacity to recognize historical mistakes and abuses of historiography, as well as by my “corrections,” some of which in time might themselves need correcting.

What do I find wanting or defective in other important works?

Becker's book, *The Declaration of Independence*, published first in 1922, is comprehensive. He covers the natural-rights philosophy behind the document, the history and theory of English government, the writing of the Declaration and its successes and failures as a literary document, and the Declaration itself as a philosophical work. He does not question Jefferson's authorship of the finished product, as do more current scholars, but he does question Jefferson's “felicity of expression.” That is worth addressing, and I do address it.

The major flaw of Becker's work is that it is dated. Much has been said about the Declaration after Becker's book. Another flaw, and it is one that I discuss in chapter 5, is Becker's own “felicity of expression.” His style of writing is roundabout and metaphor-heavy to the point of wearisomeness, and his metaphors are often mixed. Consequently, it is frequently difficult to penetrate through the haze of his metaphors to grasp exactly what he is trying to say. He was, of course, in his day, at the head of the Progressivist historical movement, which challenged the notion of any non-relativist/subjectivist sense of historical truth and which made “everyman his own historian”¹ and every “historian” as good as any other.

In 1963, Leonard Levy's *Jefferson and Civil Liberties* came out. Acknowledging the philosophical content of the Declaration (its timelessness), Levy objects to the superficiality of that content. Jefferson merely offered stale, timeworn maxims for a “libertarianism” that he never then or later fleshed out, though he

¹ Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1932: 235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1838208>

ought to have done so. Jefferson was preoccupied with the noble utterances of a youth who had experienced too little of life to be philosophizing, about instantiating liberty and equality (terms he never defined) in a republic of and by the people. He was “a philosopher of freedom without a philosophy of freedom,”² and an armchair philosopher who ought to have kept his musings out of the Declaration. I aim to show that Jefferson was not so philosophically naïve.

In 1978, Gary Wills published his *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*.³ He aims to correct the notion that we hold and cherish today: Jefferson somehow invented America through writing the Declaration—an enormously large claim. Consequently, both he and the Declaration—for Wills, Congress' Declaration taken as Jefferson's—have become sanctified. Jefferson, it seems to Wills, had a vision of America before America was born. The real Jefferson, the document that Jefferson submitted to the Congress shows, was a vague moralist. Yet his vagueness, still manifest in the document that comes down to us today, has lent itself a tendency to interpret the Declaration as a work of heavy profundity. That thesis, not so radically different from Levy's, I too challenge.

There is then Pauline Maier's book, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (1997), in which she takes herself to advance the points that Becker wanted to advance, but was prohibited from advancing, because of the conservative time in which he lived.⁴ She begins with astonishment that the Declaration of Independence is today treated as a religious relic and that Thomas Jefferson is seen by many as another Moses. There is nothing of originality, she asserts, in the document. Declarations of independence were common when Jefferson took up his quill to create his draft. She argues too that Thomas Jefferson was not the author, but merely the drafter, of the Declaration. The other four members of his committee made important additions to his “draft,” and the copy that was submitted to the Continental Congress was heavily edited, so much so that Maier claims some members made more substantive contributions than did Jefferson. Maier's overall thesis, I aim to show, is false.

Danielle Allen, in *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014), iterates Maier's thesis that Jefferson

² Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 172–73.

³ Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), ix.

⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), xvii–xviii.

was merely the author of the first draft of the Declaration with a singular twist: Anyone who had any part, however unnoticeable, in the creation of the Declaration of Independence must be considered as an author, for the document passed through numerous hands, was inspired by numerous thousands of persons over centuries, and was essentially a democratic proclamation. It not only spoke for all Americans at the time, but it also speaks to all people today. She also puts forth the view that “equality” is the key to understanding the Declaration. While “equality” is the key to understanding the Declaration, Allen leaves that as an unexplained posit. She merely believes that there cannot be liberty without equality, and that, I show later, is nowise obvious. The main flaw of her book is its tendentiousness, as the term “a reading” indicates. It *can be* interpreted chiefly as a document on equality. I go further and show that “equality” is *the key* to grasping the document—a much more singular claim.

There are other important books, of which I make little use: e.g., Allen Jayne's *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy and Theology*. His is an admirable look at the philosophy and theology behind Jefferson's Declaration and prominent philosophers—Bolingbroke, Locke, Reid, Bacon, and Kames—who influenced Jefferson. I have done the same in my many books on Jefferson—my focus is almost always on the philosophical mind of Jefferson—and there is much in Jayne's book that is agreeable. There are also Malone's and Armitage's books, which I have already mentioned, to which I occasionally refer throughout.

There are then numerous other books of which I make use, as I see fit, by prominent Early American scholars. There are also many other books I have ignored. Exhaustion is not my aim; relevance is. There is merely too much “stuff” on the Declaration for anyone to aim at exhaustion, even if exhaustion were a worthwhile aim.

There are eight chapters in this book.

The first two, covering Jefferson's study and practice of law and his Summary View of the Rights of British America, are prefatory. Study and practice of law and the reception of his Summary View put Jefferson in a position to be on the committee to write the Declaration, and ultimately, led to him being the sole writer of the first draft.

Chapter 3 is a critical analysis of the Declaration of Independence. What was the purpose of the document? What exactly is the argument behind the claim for justified revolution and separation? Is it a logically coherent argument? Is the document eloquently crafted?

Chapters 4 and 5 concern the authorship of the Declaration. Was Jefferson really the author of the document or were others vitally involved, and if so, are

they to be understood as authors? In chapter 4, I look at people in Jefferson's day and in our day, who object to the originality of the Declaration—some of whom argue that Jefferson was merely the document's drafter. In chapter 5, I critically assess the merit of those criticisms.

The last three chapters address what I take to be the axial concept of the Declaration: equality. Just what did Jefferson mean by human equality and how, and to what extent, does it justify natural rights? I ask and answer those three questions in chapter 6. The final two chapters, in effect, look at the scope of "men" in the sentence, "All men are created equal." Were Native Americans and Blacks included (chapter 7)? Were women included (chapter 8)? A study of Jefferson's corpus of writings offers answers to those questions.

I close with an epilog that sums up the arguments on behalf of my thesis: that the Declaration is both a timely and timeless document. There are, in addition, four appendices: one, the Declaration as it comes to us today; two, Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration; three, the signatories of the document; four, the Mecklenberg Declaration of Independence.

I add four procedural points before ending this prologue.

First, I adopt the terms "First Draft" to the draft that Jefferson composed prior to comments from the Committee of Five, and "Fair Copy" to the draft that he submitted to the Continental Congress, after cosmetic edits by other members of his committee. "Declaration of Independence" I use only for the finished copy.

Second, I offer no citations for letters from or among Founding Fathers. All letters are easily available to all scholars on *Founders Online*.

Third, I often, unapologetically, include lengthy quotes. This is chiefly a philosophical book, or a work on Analytic History if one prefers, and so it is of utmost importance that vagueness and equivocation be eschewed and that clarity and precision be achieved. Paraphrase, without due circumspection, can readily lend itself to a biased reading of a text. So too can drawing out a quote from the context of a paragraph. There are also, in Jeffersonian scholarship, too many theses driven by authorial biases which could be readily controverted were they not written under the cloak of artsy, inventive paraphrase.

Last, I would like to thank, sincerely and not as a matter of form, one reviewer who offered substantive feedback which enabled me to improve this book.

I hope readers will enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

PAGES MISSING
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About the Author

M. Andrew Holowchak, Ph.D., is a professor of philosophy and history, who taught at institutions such as University of Pittsburgh, University of Michigan, and Rutgers University, Camden. He is author/editor of some 75 books and nearly 400 published essays, formal and informal, on topics such as ethics, ancient philosophy, science, psychoanalysis, and critical thinking. His current research is on Thomas Jefferson—he is acknowledged by many scholars to be the world's foremost authority—and has published over 225 essays, formal and informal, and 31 books on Jefferson. He also writes on Ukraine. He has authored *Whisk of the Red Broom: Stalin and the Ukraine, 1928–1933*, *Michael Chemny: Expatriated Ukrainian Patriot*, and *The Oath*. He has a passion for gardening and enjoys lifting weights (former Michigan superheavyweight powerlifting champion), bike riding, conferencing, and talking about Thomas Jefferson and historiography.

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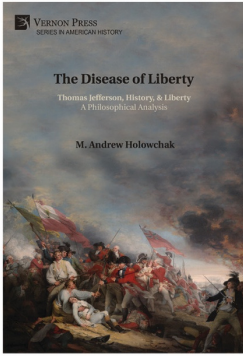
X

Xenophon: 1.

Holowchak's Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: A Document, Timely & Timeless adds to ever-growing publications of books on Jefferson. He continues his assault on revisionist, debunking accounts of Jefferson in favor of a laudatory approach is written in an immersive, 18-19th century prose that cripples readers' acceptance of 21st century standards of contemporary historians to judge Jefferson. The prose stresses into think like Jefferson. Holowchak sticks to his methodology of extensive citations of source materials, that he turns into a basis for philosophical analyses and crafty, sometimes petulant, lawyering that draws firm, against-the-prevailing-current orthodoxy about the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson the man. So, readers will encounter a stream of original sources that scold recent debunking historians about the Declaration's origins and Jefferson in favor of Holowchak's traditional, heroic assessment of him. So, buy the book, read it, debate it, learn from it, and compare it to the methods of historians like Lewis Namier or Maya Jasanoff, whose work on the 18th century and other periods relies on traditional methods.

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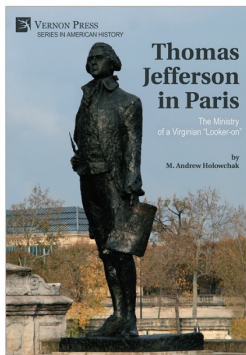
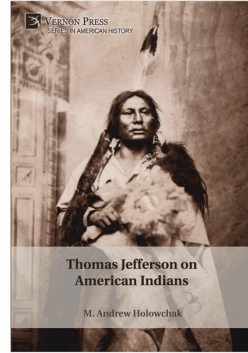
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