Chapter 7

Jefferson's Declaration of the "American Mind"

THOMAS JEFFERSON HAD SEVERAL DIFFERENT STYLES AS A WRITER. In his descriptions of nature he could be clear and spry. Here, for example, is his deft account of the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers at Harpers Ferry:

> *The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea.*

But his pen was not always so lucid. His correspondence with women, especially married ones, such as Maria Cosway, Abigail Adams, and Angelica Church, could be breathily cloying. And in his legal and governmental work, he tended, as did many others in his time, to be long-winded and Latinate, prone to select the long word when a short one would do. Consider these mind-numbing sentences:

> *Or the case may be likened to the ordinary one of a tenant for life, who may hypothecate the land for his debts during the continuance of his usufruct; but at his death the reversioner (who is also for life*

only) receives it exonerated from all burthen. The period of a generation, or the term of it's life is determined by the laws of mortality, which, varying a little only in different climates, offer a general average, to be found by observation.

He also tended toward the convoluted when in political difficulty, as in this wartime sentence: "I have too good an opinion of their love of order to believe that a removal of these troops would produce any irregular proofs of their disapprobation, but I am well assured that it would be extremely odious to them." In 1792, for example, Jefferson wrote to George Washington to try to explain away his feud with Alexander Hamilton; one can almost see Jefferson nervously tugging at his collar as he wrote these tangled sentences:

I knew that, to such a mind as yours, persuasion was idle & impertinent: that before forming your decision, you had weighed all the reasons for & against the measure, had made up your mind on full view of them, & that there could be little hope of changing the result. Pursuing my reflections too I knew we were some day to try to walk alone, and if the essay should be made while you should be alive & looking on, we should derive confidence from that circumstance, & resource if it failed.

Contrary to his image, Jefferson was not really a literary man. He had prodigious talents and a boundless range of interests, yet his tastes in literature were surprisingly pedestrian, as his prose often was. His choices in poetry were mundane at best. In his youth he was fond of Edward Young, putting these mawkish lines from Young's *Night-Thoughts*, one of the most popular poems of the eighteenth century, into his commonplace book:

The knell, the shroud, the mattock, and the grave;
The deep damp vault, the darkness, and the worm;
These are the bugbears of a winter's eve.

As one literary historian puts it, "Jefferson's literary tastes and preferences are, for their time, thoroughly conventional and unexceptional."

When he was older, his favorite poet was "Ossian." That name is in quotation marks because, though purportedly the work of a third-century Gaelic poet, such an author did not really exist. "I think this rude bard of the North the greatest Poet that has ever existed," Jefferson wrote in 1773. Ossian was later revealed to be an invention of the eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Macpherson, who had claimed he was translating material he had discovered. In Jefferson's defense, it should be noted that Goethe and Napoleon were also taken in by Macpherson's fabrications.

Jefferson also disdained most novels, which he termed "poison" that entertained but did not instruct. He seems to have overlooked that works of fiction often can deepen one's understanding of complex human behavior. The only work of prose fiction quoted in his literary commonplace book is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

Jefferson's Masterpiece

YET THERE IS, AMONG JEFFERSON'S DIVERSE WRITINGS, ONE GREAT, shining exception: The Declaration of Independence. The English writer and wit G. K. Chesterton lauded it, accurately, as "perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature."

The Declaration is remarkably un-Jeffersonian in its style. (For the convenience of the reader, the final version of it is included in an appendix at the end of this book.) It is a model of strong, plain political prose. In it, verbs push nouns, and words tend to be solid and short. The reason for this departure in his style, he explained years later, is that he tried to write in simple, clear terms because he considered the Declaration to be "an appeal to the tribunal of

the world." As such, he wrote "in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take."

In other words, he was writing not for his elite peers, but for the people. So here he became more like Thomas Paine, whose essay *Common Sense* had appeared six months before Jefferson drafted the Declaration and had quickly become a national sensation, appearing in some twenty-five editions within the year. In the pamphlet, Paine eschewed classical citations and allusions, relying more on references to the Bible and images from farm life. Unusually for the political commentary of the time, he offered no accusations of Caesarism, no denunciations of Catilines, no calls for a new Cato. Paine did not even denounce factionalism, also mandatory in eighteenth-century political writings. "Virtue" appears several times, but two of those references are to make the negative point that virtue is not a hereditary trait.

In short, Paine was emphatically not about the past. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," he proclaimed in a postscript to *Common Sense* appended a month after its first appearance. "A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand." This was indeed a new voice, bright and clear.

Jefferson heard that voice and appears to have sought to echo it. "This was the object of the Declaration of Independence," he wrote. "Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject." Jefferson's explicit use here of "common sense" was perhaps a nod toward the influence of Paine. Jefferson had received the pamphlet in the mail in February of 1776, not long after it was published.

It may have helped that Jefferson drafted the document not atop a hill in a remote Virginia plantation, but in the rooms he had rented in Philadelphia, the biggest city in America, from Jacob Graff, a German-born bricklayer. When he was overseeing Monticello, Jefferson was not required to persuade, only to order. But

in Philadelphia he would hear coming through his window the voices of the people he now needed to address—the workingman, the European immigrant, the shopkeeper, the sailor.

He set out in the Declaration, he asserted, not just to present his own views but to give "expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion." But that was disingenuous. Jefferson really was attempting something far more difficult. He was employing a plain American idiom while attempting to move the American mind into the future. He was pushing them hard, and far beyond any existing consensus. One month before the Declaration was passed, only four colonies had instructed their delegates to support independence. But the Declaration's appearance would do much to change that.

A Declaration of Epicureanism

JEFFERSON BEGINS BY STATING THAT "WHEN, IN THE COURSE OF HUman events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another. . . ." This is good prose, almost conversational, and a great way to start. It goes on to say that we owe everyone else an explanation of what we are doing.

This first paragraph also contains one of the few hints of religion in the document—a quick reference to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." It is one of the few mentions Jefferson makes of God, while "Jesus Christ" and "Christianity" are entirely absent. (Congress, in editing the document, would insert more.) Jefferson emphatically wanted no establishment of religious authority or tests of belief. By contrast, the Delaware state constitution, written and adopted just thirty-five miles to the south in that same summer of 1776, required anyone holding office to "profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, one God, blessed for evermore; and . . . acknowledge

the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration."

The second paragraph is probably the key passage of writing in all of American history. In it, Jefferson sets forth the beliefs of these people who are declaring themselves a new nation upon the Earth. We can all recall how it begins: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." The last five words of that sentence sweep aside millennia of unequal births and preordained lives and define these new Americans as a people who subscribe to a revolutionary belief. In the context of the late 1700s, it is even a bit pugnacious: *Do you think you are better than us?* In this new nation, all people—or at least all white men—would have equal standing before the law. That was a Hutton-like leap of the imagination.

The Declaration's entire second paragraph is also a garden of Epicurean belief, though not explicitly. It bears repeating that Jefferson was writing for the American masses, not the classical classes. To that end, he would be influenced by the ancients—but he would not cite them.

At twenty-two lines, the second is the longest paragraph in the document. The first sentence of this paragraph ends with the assertion that among the "unalienable rights" of these equal men are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This is the essence of Epicureanism. In *Our Declaration*, a wonderful line-by-line and word-by-word explication of the Declaration of Independence, the political philosopher Danielle Allen comments that "the Declaration shimmers with a sublime optimism." This is nowhere more true than in that phrase.

The language here also makes explicit Jefferson's divergence from Locke, who in his "Second Treatise on Civil Government" had used the phrase, "life, liberty and estate" (that is, property). Jefferson here replaced that last word with "happiness"—and in the process encouraged a social revolution. This is how Jonathan Israel summarizes the alteration:

> *Where in Locke property is the basis of social division into classes, Jefferson's formulation marginalized the principle of social class.*

The landless could no longer be regarded as either so marginal or so subordinate as in Locke. Where Locke nurtured a negative conception of liberty, centered on protection of property, for Jeffersonians liberty was a positive, developmental concept to be upheld and advanced by the state and its agencies.

Having covered a lot of ground in the first sentence of that second paragraph, Jefferson moves on in the next sentence to demolish the notion of the divine origin of government. Governments are made by men, he states, and receive their powers from "the consent of the governed." Although he does not mention it, that idea originated with the Scottish philosopher George Buchanan almost two hundred years earlier, starting a train of thought that was carried by Scottish tutors to their American pupils.

It means that all power comes from the people—a notion that would be reinforced eleven years later by the opening phrase of the Constitution, "We the people."

Jefferson also may have had in the back of his mind another rather elaborate classical literary reference, albeit a secondhand one. In this paragraph, two of Jefferson's key phrases, about "inalienable rights" and "consent of the people," echo an exchange in Lord Lyttelton's *Dialogues of the Dead*. (Lyttelton's work, written during the 1760s, is itself expressly an imitation of a work by Lucian of Samosata, a first-century AD Syrian satirist who wrote in Greek—and was an Epicurean.) In his 32nd Dialogue, Lyttelton, himself a politician and friend of Alexander Pope, imagines an exchange in which Servius Tullius, the legendary sixth king of Rome, asks, "Is not Liberty an inherent, inalienable Right of Mankind?"

Lyttelton then has Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor-philosopher and a contemporary of Lucian's, respond, "Forms of Government may, and must, be occasionally changed, with the consent of the People." The emperor also is made to say, "Liberty, like Power, is only good for those who possess it, when it is under the constant Direction of Virtue."

Like Jefferson's first sentence in this paragraph, the second one ends with the word "happiness"—in this case, the people have the

right to organize their government in the manner that seems to them "most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

The very next word in the Declaration, at the beginning of the second paragraph's third sentence, is another Epicurean buzzword. "Prudence," Jefferson writes, dictates that governments are not changed lightly. This is the first of the four virtues listed by Jefferson as the essence of the Epicurean way of life, the other three being temperance, fortitude, and justice.

And yes, there also was some influence of Locke in the document. "When a long train of abuses and usurpations" are imposed upon a people, Jefferson says, "it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such a government." The Englishman had written in his "Second Treatise" that the people should rouse themselves if oppressed by "a long train of Abuses, Prevarications, and Artifices."

Indicting the King

"LET FACTS BE SUBMITTED TO A CANDID WORLD," JEFFERSON CONTINues, and turns to his charges against the king, a list of some twenty sentences that constitutes about half the entire document.

But Jefferson engages in a rhetorical sleight of hand here. He gives no specifics. By not identifying "names, dates, or places," argues the rhetorician Stephen Lucas, Jefferson "magnified the seriousness of the grievances by making it seem as if each charge referred not to a particular piece of legislation or to an isolated act in a single colony, but to a violation of the constitution that had been repeated on many occasions throughout America. The ambiguity of the grievances also made them more difficult to refute."

Jefferson then delivers the sum of this indictment. The American people have weighed the character of the king and found him wanting. He just is not good enough for them. "A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people." Reading this, one can almost hear the applause of the Scottish political philosophers.

The final two paragraphs deal with what the document has asserted have become two separate peoples, the British and the Americans. "We have warned them . . . We have reminded them . . . We have appealed to their native justice, . . . and we have conjured them" to stop their king. But, "they too have been deaf to the voice of justice." Remember here that "justice" is the last of Jefferson's four key Epicurean virtues.

So, he concludes, we are now "the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World." (That last phrase was inserted in the congressional editing process.) We are "and of right ought to be free and independent states." All bonds are cut. We are "absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown," and "all political connection . . . is and ought to be totally dissolved." As if not quite believing it, he repeats the phrase "free and independent states."

In the last sentence, the signers "pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honour." In other words: *We will not back down. Our virtue is at stake.*

Signing the Declaration

MEMBERS OF CONGRESS TOOK THAT VOW SERIOUSLY. THE INITIAL SIGNing of the document, on July 4, 1776, was a moment of "Silence and Gloom," Benjamin Rush would recall to John Adams. Decades later, he asked Adams in a letter,

> *Do you recollect the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress, to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants?*

The only moment of relief came when the portly Benjamin Harrison (attended William & Mary), a Falstaffian figure, grimly joked to the smaller Elbridge Gerry (Harvard, 1762) that "I shall have

a great advantage over you Mr: Gerry when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead." They were conscious that they represented only part of the American population, faced many internal opponents, and possessed no army to speak of—and that they were publicly challenging the world's leading power. Jefferson's old tutors would have been proud: Nineteen of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration were of Scottish or Ulster Scot extraction.

John Adams, who had been thinking about the importance of virtue to the fledgling republic, now harbored some private doubts. "Yesterday the greatest Question was decided, which ever was debated in America," he wrote to his wife. But, he wondered, were the people good enough to carry it through?

> *The new Government . . . will require a Purification from our Vices, and an Augmentation of our Virtues or they will be no Blessings. The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are extreamly addicted to Corruption and Venality, as well as the Great.—I am not without Apprehensions from this Quarter.*

The Declaration shifted public opinion and especially rallied radicals. It was greeted at Princeton, for example, with great enthusiasm. As one contemporary account put it, "Nassau Hall was grandly illuminated, and *independency* proclaimed under a triple volley of musketry, and universal acclamation for the prosperity of the *United States*. The ceremony was conducted with the greatest decorum."

At about the same time, American soldiers in New York responded to a public reading of the Declaration by pulling down the gilded statue of King George III that dominated the southern end of Broadway in Manhattan. The statue, made of two tons of lead and painted with gold leaf, portrayed him as a Roman emperor astride a horse. It had been a present to the city from the

king himself in 1770. Washington admonished that in the future, his soldiers should leave such actions to civilian authorities. By some accounts, portions of the monarch's statue were melted down and made into musket balls for the Revolutionary Army.

A Continuing Challenge

ALL IN ALL, JEFFERSON HAD CARRIED OFF AN EXTRAORDINARY FEAT, relaying a lifetime of classical learning about liberty and rights but employing strong, straightforward prose that could be read aloud on street corners and in taverns and understood by all who listened. He had not just explained to the people the reasons for revolt, but created a document of lasting philosophical and literary merit that still resonates today as we try to understand and direct our country.

Whether or not Jefferson intended it, his phrase that everyone was created equal created a test for future generations, a standard against which to measure the nation again and again. That is why it figures significantly in several of the most memorable speeches and statements in American history. Two examples came from women in the 1840s. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, at the first American convention on women's rights, shocked some Americans in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Declaration, which stated in part that "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." In the same decade, dissident female millworkers in Lowell, Massachusetts, demanded "EQUAL RIGHTS, or death to the corporations."

A third echo came, of course, in the Gettysburg Address. Midway through the nation's most severe test, President Abraham Lincoln, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to commemorate the battle that had ended there on July 4, 1863, began by invoking Jefferson's words: "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men

are created equal." Lincoln owned a little leather-bound notebook in which he had pasted newspaper clippings as well as the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

Then in August 1963, one hundred years after Lincoln, one of the most powerful moments in Martin Luther King Jr.'s best-remembered speech came when he quoted that same phrase. "I have a dream," he declared, "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal.'"

Fifteen years later, Harvey Milk, an openly gay San Francisco politician, again invoked that phrase in a speech when he said that, "No matter how hard you try, you cannot erase those words from the Declaration of Independence."

As Pauline Maier observes, part of the power of this section of the Declaration is that it's more about "what we ought to be" rather than "what we are." As such, it continues to speak to us now, issuing a challenge across more than two centuries.