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The Lost Meaning of "The Pursuit of Happiness"

Arthur M. Schlesinger*

PROBABLY no historical expression is more familiar to Americans than "the pursuit of happiness," immortalized by the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. Yet it has puzzled many that life and liberty should be pronounced by the great document as "unalienable rights" of "all men" but not happiness—only the pursuit of it. It is worth asking, however, what Jefferson and his associates on the drafting committee really meant by the famous phrase. Able scholars have repeatedly examined the meaning of the text as a whole, but none has given attention to this particular wording.¹

What, then, was the import of the term "pursuit" in the minds of the framers of the Declaration? Did it signify merely the pursuing or seeking of happiness, as is conventionally assumed, or was it used in a different sense, as when we today refer to the pursuit of law or the pursuit of medicine? According to the *New English Dictionary* it has borne both meanings since at least the sixteenth century.² Obviously the distinction is a vital one, for, if the common supposition is mistaken, it follows that the historic manifesto proclaimed the *practicing* rather than the *quest* of happiness as a basic right equally with life and liberty. For evidence of this

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¹ Among the more notable book-length studies are Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence, a Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922); Julian P. Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text as Shown in Facsimiles of Various Drafts by Its Author* (Washington, 1943); Edward Dumbauld, *The Declaration of Independence and What It Means Today* (Norman, Okla., 1950); Herbert Friedenwald, *The Declaration of Independence, an Interpretation and an Analysis* (New York, 1904); and John H. Hazelton, *The Declaration of Independence, Its History . . .* (New York, 1906). Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), deals with the meaning of the word "happiness," especially as later interpreted, but not with that of "pursuit," which alone concerns the present essay.

² The alternative definitions there given are: "The action of pursuing, chasing, or following, with intent to overtake and catch . . ." and "The action of following or engaging in something, as a profession, business, recreation, etc. . . ." James A. H. Murray, ed., *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford, Eng., 1888-1925), VII, 1636.

usage contemporary with the Anglo-American dispute the *New English Dictionary* cites a letter of Edmund Burke in 1774 in which he wrote, "Your constitution of mind is such, that you must have a pursuit."³

In this sense of the actual practicing—and in no other, so far as I have found—the concept also appeared in patriot writings during the controversy. Thus James Otis in *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (Boston, 1764) affirmed that the duty of government is "above all things to provide for the security, the quiet, and happy enjoyment of life, liberty, and property."⁴ More categorically, Josiah Quincy, Jr., in his *Observations on the Act of Parliament Commonly Called the Boston Port-Bill* (Boston, 1774) avowed that the proper object of civil society is "the greatest happiness of the greatest number,"⁵ and James Wilson in his *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* (Philadelphia, 1774) asserted that "the happiness of the society is the first law of every government."⁶ Likewise John Adams in his *Thoughts on Government* (Philadelphia, 1776) declared that "the happiness of society is the end of government."⁷ In short, none of these spokesmen of the American cause thought of happiness as something a people were entitled simply to strive for but as something that was theirs by natural right.

As though to make this conception unquestionably clear, the revolutionary Virginia Convention's memorable Declaration of Rights on June 12, 1776, particularized it as the "pursuing and obtaining" of happiness.⁸ The language was that of George Mason, Jefferson's long-time friend whom he described in his autobiography as "a man of the first order of wisdom among those who acted on the theatre of the Revolu-

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ James Otis, *Some Political Writings*, in Charles F. Mullett, ed., *University of Missouri Studies*, IV (Columbia, Mo., 1929), 309.

⁵ Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy, Junior, of Massachusetts, 1744-1775*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1874), 323.

⁶ Bird Wilson, ed., *The Works of the Honourable James Wilson . . .* (Philadelphia, 1804), III, 206.

⁷ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams . . .* (Boston, 1850-56), IV, 193.

⁸ Helen Hill, *George Mason, Constitutionalist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), 136. This wording may have seemed the more necessary because John Locke, whose writings were a major source of patriot inspiration, had used the expression, "the pursuit of happiness," in the sense of "pursuing." For examples see Herbert L. Ganter, "Jefferson's 'Pursuit of Happiness' and Some Forgotten Men," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d Ser., XVI (1936), 564.

tion."⁹ It is unlikely that in drawing up the Declaration of Independence shortly afterward for the Continental Congress he did not take Mason's phrasing into account.

Why he determined upon his own more concise rendering we do not know, but doubtless he deemed the added words sheer excess baggage. As John Adams, one of his colleagues on the drafting committee, said, Jefferson was noted for "a happy talent of composition" and "peculiar felicity of expression."¹⁰ In any case the latter part of the sentence containing his formulation stated explicitly that it is a government's duty to the governed "to effect their safety and happiness." The extraordinary thing is that through the years the two parts of this sentence have not been read together. Adams, who had flatly declared a few months before that "the happiness of society is the end of government," found no fault with Jefferson's version, though he did not hesitate to suggest changes elsewhere in the document.¹¹

In view of these circumstances the conclusion seems inescapable that the long-standing misinterpretation of "the pursuit of happiness" should at last be corrected and the history books be rewritten to restore to the celebrated phrase its more emphatic meaning.

⁹ Hill, *George Mason, Constitutionalist*, 152.

¹⁰ Letter to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 6, 1822, in C. F. Adams, ed., *Works*, II, 513-514n.

¹¹ Becker, *Declaration of Independence*, 136-138, 152-155.