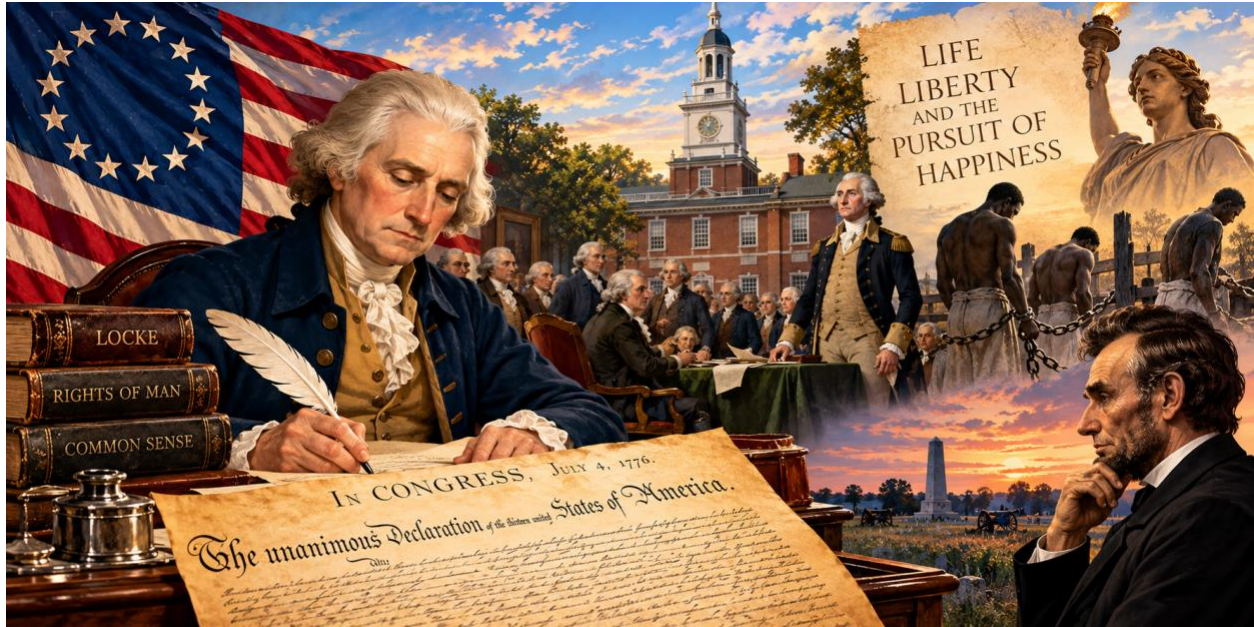




The American Covenant: The Declaration of Independence

The Promise

America's covenant and founding values are essentially encapsulated in our Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson wrote:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Setting aside for a moment the fact that this lofty statement must have rung hollow to Black Americans held in slavery, it expressed the foundation of a social and philosophical movement that was a legacy of the Enlightenment. Philosophers such as John Locke influenced Jefferson and were at the vanguard of a movement that increasingly challenged the idea that a nobility and its monarch possessed a natural or divinely ordained right to rule.

America was not to be about monarchs who claimed a “divine right” to rule over others. Jefferson and the other revolutionaries were asserting something fundamentally different: legitimate government derived its authority from the people.

The Consent of the Governed

The foundation of the American Revolution was likewise expressed in the Declaration's next great proposition:

“That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”

That was a revolutionary idea. Government existed to secure rights, and its legitimate power came not from a king but from those who were governed. If government became destructive of those purposes, the Declaration went on to assert that the people possessed the right to alter or abolish it.

King George III, his ministers, and Parliament saw their authority very differently. British taxation and increasingly coercive measures outraged large segments of colonial society. The Stamp Act and subsequent legislation helped unite resistance up and down the eastern seaboard, and political resistance eventually became armed revolution.

A List of Grievances—and a Covenant

Much of the Declaration is a list of grievances against the British king. Jefferson introduced them with the accusation that the king's actions represented “a history of repeated injuries and usurpations,” aimed at establishing “an absolute Tyranny over these States.”

The reasons for independence, therefore, were more than complaints against a monarch. They became part of the covenant entered into by the signers: an assertion that certain rights belonged to human beings and that governments were accountable to the people they governed.

But that covenant contained an enormous contradiction.

Freedom for Some, Slavery for Others

How can such a lofty and momentous document as our Declaration of Independence be regarded as anything other than an example of colossal hypocrisy when many of the men who embraced its principles also participated in or benefited from slavery? Put another way, how could America's founding values proclaim freedom for some while permitting slavery for others?

Jefferson himself embodied that contradiction. He condemned slavery in his writings, yet remained a slaveholder throughout his lifetime. The contradiction between the Declaration's universal language and the institution of slavery would remain unresolved long after independence.

That contradiction did not disappear when the Revolution ended. It followed the new nation directly into the creation of its Constitution.

The Compromise That Left the Nation Incomplete

The problem became one of political compromise between states with differing economic systems and interests, particularly over slavery. Delegates from slaveholding states demanded protection for an institution upon which much of their wealth depended, while other delegates

concluded that compromises involving slavery were necessary if a stronger Union were to be created. Slavery repeatedly threatened to derail the Constitutional Convention.

America, at its beginning, was therefore an **incomplete nation**. The original covenant proclaimed human equality, while the constitutional structure accommodated human bondage. Under the Three-Fifths Compromise, three-fifths of the enslaved population was included when determining representation in the House of Representatives and direct taxation. Enslaved people themselves, of course, had no political voice in the arrangement. The result increased the representation—and therefore the political power—of the slaveholding states.

Slavery was America's “poison pill,” an issue that became increasingly resistant to compromise as the country expanded. The Constitution created a nation, but it did not resolve the fundamental contradiction between slavery and the principles proclaimed in 1776.

Eventually, that contradiction helped tear the country apart.

Lincoln and the Unfinished Promise

It took the Civil War and the leadership of Abraham Lincoln to move the country closer to fulfilling the promise contained in the Declaration. Lincoln explicitly connected the war with the founding proposition that “all men are created equal.” At Gettysburg in 1863, he looked backward to 1776 and forward toward what the nation might yet become. The Library of Congress describes Lincoln as treating the Declaration as the founding statement of the nation's ideals and the Civil War as a struggle toward a “new birth of freedom.”

Lincoln concluded:

“...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

That “new birth of freedom” was what the Declaration of Independence had promised but the country had failed to realize. The covenant could not be fulfilled while millions of Americans remained enslaved.

It was not another political compromise that finally confronted that contradiction. It took the near destruction of the country, a terrible Civil War, emancipation, and the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of Americans. The nation that emerged was still imperfect, but the meaning of its founding covenant had been profoundly changed.

The Declaration had proclaimed the promise in 1776. The Civil War forced America to confront what that promise really meant.