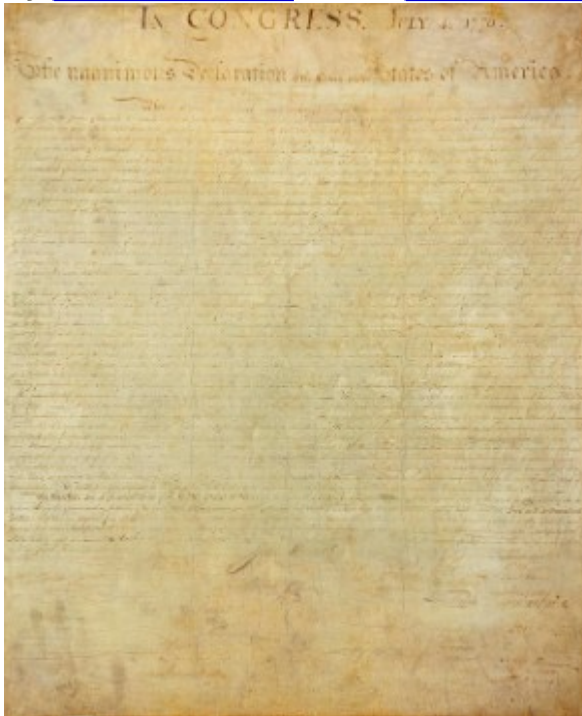


Patriot cause

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue



The signed copy of the declaration, now badly faded because of poor preserving practices in the 19th century, is on display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. From [Wikipedia](#)

Every year when the Fourth of July approaches I think about the remarkable series of events that resulted in the independence of the American colonies and the founding of a new nation. And every year I pick up a book to refresh my memory.

This year I read Joseph J. Ellis's *Revolutionary Summer: The Birth of American Independence*. I'm amazed once again by how unpredictable the outcome of the War for Independence was. Very few British politicians and military leaders took the Declaration of Independence seriously; most assumed that the largest, best-equipped, and best-trained army and navy in the world would quickly crush the rebellion. Yet after the final battle was fought at Yorktown, Great Britain had suffered 40,000 casualties, spent 50 million pounds, and lost the colonies.

One of the fatal assumptions was that support for the revolutionary cause was thin among the colonies. But as Ellis argues, during the "revolutionary summer" between

May and October 1776, “a consensus for American independence emerged and was officially declared, the outlines for an American republic were first proposed, the problems that would face its future were faced and finessed.”

And yet the British nearly won. I love the story about George Washington’s decision to defend Manhattan from the invading British forces. The act was a catastrophe and almost resulted in the total loss of the Continental Army, described by Washington himself as “half-starved; always in rags, without pay.” The soldiers miraculously escaped over the East River and managed to hold the British at bay, winning enough critical battles to persuade the British to surrender.

I love even more the ideas in Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration: “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.”

The radical notion that every human being has unalienable rights, innate worth and dignity, and that the first purpose of government is to protect and preserve this idea comes from Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke. But it also comes from Genesis, with the equally radical proposal that human beings are created in the image of the Creator, that their worth and the rights that stem from it are basic to their very nature and identity. This is why people of faith cannot accommodate the denial of basic human rights and human dignity, and why churches become involved in the never-ending struggle to establish and protect those rights for all people.

The founders either did not fully understand the political implications of the idea or believed that to act on its implications was not possible at the time. So they left women and African slaves outside the perimeter of “unalienable rights.”

In many ways we’re still working our way through the political, social, and economic ramifications of our Declaration of Independence. The process requires hard work and honesty. William Sloane Coffin said that a true patriot loves his or her country enough to criticize it when it fails to live up to its highest ideals. “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good,” he said in *A Passion for the Possible*. “The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s eternal lover’s quarrel with the entire world.”