

ARE ALL MEN CREATED EQUAL?

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THE CHIT CHAT CLUB

APRIL 11, 1988

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Presented to the Chit Chat Club

Monday, April 11, 1988

The renowned statement that "all men were created equal" was made over two hundred years ago in the Declaration of Independence. What was really meant by that statement when it was written and why was it written? Who was it referring to? Does the statement have the same meaning today as when it was written?

Part One

To refresh our memories, I quote from the source, the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen United States of America, "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitled them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

"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."

Was the concept that "all men are created equal" a political statement or was it a statement of an utopian concept on behalf of its author based on the thought that the rights of man must be achieved in a new society. Philosophers had been discussing equality of men as far back as Aristotle who stated, "Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal." Here for Jefferson was an opportunity to finally implement the concept. But, was it meant to apply to all the people of the colonies including red men, black men and females in addition to all the males. Was there evidence at that time that all human beings were created equal and did have equal resources or potential? Is it possible that Jefferson was really advocating equality of rights or was he developing an entirely new thought? In developing equal rights for people to achieve "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," has it been useful to raise people's expectations for an equality that may not exist.

In 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was written, its purpose was a political statement about the relationship between a king and his subjects listing the grievances against the ruler in an attempt to rally the loosely associated thirteen colonies into action for independence. It was a statement of the unequal relationship between the rulers of England and their treatment of the colonists of North America. It is hard to believe that the reference to the men with a grievance included Indian savages or the black slaves or indentured servants.

The Declaration of Independence was not written as a piece of legislation, it was a resolution expressing a political point of view. It is possible that using the phrase "all men are created equal" was seen as a dramatic and ideal way to make the revolution universally appealing to the masses of people. It was 87 years later that the phrase "all men are created equal" was used again by Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg address. The purpose of that speech was to mark a major turning point in the Civil War; however, it also was an appeal to the populous to make the sacrifices necessary for continuation of a hard and bitter war. In this

instance, Lincoln was surely referring to the institution of slavery alone. In addition, it is interesting that basically the same rallying cry was used in the late nineteenth century by Marx and Engels calling for a classless society where everyone would be equal to promote communism. At that time, the conflict was between the vast, unequal power of wealth on economic terms. It is hard to believe the communist leaders ever really believed that anyone but the ruling elite would govern a classless society.

Part Two

Let's examine the environment in 1776 to get some perspective on the events that lead up to the writing of the Declaration of Independence. At mid-year, the thirteen colonies had been in open rebellion with England for over twelve months. Although Washington, who had been in command of the Continental Army since July of 1775, had finally driven the British from Boston in March of 1776, the Red Coats were now landing on Long Island in preparation for a later attack on New York and to most people the progress of the war or rebellion was slow and uncertain. Late in 1775, there had been a setback when an attempt to seize Montreal had failed. As the summer of 1776 began, the British were starting their naval blockade of the colonies' ports. Therefore, the outlook for the success of the rebellion was grim.

Undoubtedly, most colonists must have wanted independence from England, or at least relief from the harsh aspects of British rule, but not all felt it should come from armed revolt. Some colonists may have understood with sympathy that in the 1760's and 1770's Britain was having problems maintaining its position as a world power after defeating France in the Seven Year War and was having a difficult time balancing its governmental budget. While sympathetic to the problems, the colonists, particularly the land owners, were by 1775 feeling that they were bearing more than their share as the series of new taxes continued even after the infamous tax on tea and the climax of the Boston tea party in 1773. The

colonies had been putting up with the maintenance of a British army in North America since 1763. While the colonists certainly understood some of the Crown's problems, the biggest complaint was that they did not feel they were treated as equals inasmuch as they had no representation in the British Parliament. Ben Franklin had been in Great Britain for 18 years trying to represent the colonies and obtain treatment for them more equal to that of the British people in England. Many colonists certainly wanted independence but they must have felt some loyalty to Britain and hoped to settle their differences peaceably.

While the rebellion was going on in the north, Virginia provided the leadership of the movement for independence as it had from the beginning. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee made a resolution before the Continental Congress that "The United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states." On June 11, Congress named a special committee to draft a declaration supporting Lee's resolution. It included John Adams, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman. As we know Jefferson was asked to prepare the first draft. However, elsewhere in the colonies Pennsylvania, with its Quaker influence, was very reluctant to engage any conduct that might result in conflict. New York was another colony with little cohesive desire for freedom from the Crown. South Carolina also was not highly motivated for independence in the spring of 1776. The colonies were not a homogeneous group of people but were basically a rural community populated by settlers and farmers who were not necessarily revolutionists. Already, the cost of the rebellion against the British appeared to be replacing the British taxes with more taxes by the colonies.

The colonies were in need of a leader or a standard to rally them. Thomas Jefferson must have realized as he began his draft that to conclude a successful rebellion it was a necessity to provide a document that would stir men's hearts to make the sacrifice to continue the revolution to a successful end.

Part Three

Let's now look at Jefferson and some of the facts of his life to see if there is some clue to help us better understand his possible motive or thinking in drafting this document the way he did.

Thomas Jefferson was an unusual man with widely diverse talents from architecture to the design of the swivel chair. His intellectual interests were likewise broad, not only writing, reading but also the collecting of books. His library became the nucleus of the present Library of Congress. He was born in Virginia and educated at William and Mary at Williamsburg. Early in his life, he demonstrated an unusual intellectual curiosity. We know that Jefferson was familiar with the writing of great liberal writers of the time, particularly Locke and his thesis of the natural rights of man. His talent for clear and simple English was early recognized by the legislators and politicians. The Tidewater region where Jefferson lived was very much an area of anglophiles with many of the aristocratic ways of Great Britain. However, Jefferson was considered a liberal who challenged the control the Tidewater aristocrats held over Virginia politics. However, he nevertheless maintained a lifestyle of the privileged.

Jefferson's father died when he was 14 years old and at majority he inherited from his father 22 slaves and about 5000 acres of land. At the time he wrote the Declaration of Independence, he had increased the number of slaves he owned and his land holdings. In 1794, Jefferson had over 150 slaves working on in excess of 5,500 acres. At his death, he was in serious financial straits but still held a number of slaves although he had mentioned from time to time the institution should someday be abolished.

Beginning in 1773 Jefferson was part of the Raleigh Tavern Group, which was an early force for the establishment of an unification of the existing colonies through a system of committees of correspondence. In

1774 he was one of the leader in voicing anger at the closing of the Boston harbor after the famous tea party and hoped to arouse a then lethargic Virginia to action. During this time he was drafting various resolutions suggesting ways of dealing with the British. One of these resolutions under the title of "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" was printed and distributed in Philadelphia and London. It was a bold but analytical statement of independence from the Crown, but was too extreme in a broad sense for the time and never was presented to the Virginia convention or the Continental Congress. Nevertheless, while he was disappointed it was not accepted, this paper propelled Jefferson into the front ranks as the champion of America rights and was key in establishing the credentials that would in 1776 place him on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. Like most of Jefferson's political writings, this document was written for a specific political purpose, not as an abstract political treatise.

Jefferson must have been stirred and impressed by the attention that Patrick Henry's dramatic proclamation in 1775 of "Give me liberty or give me death" received and realized the need for overstatement to attract the attention he wanted for independence. And again in 1775 Jefferson heard another bold statement by Patrick Henry that received wide acclaim, "Gentlemen may cry for peace, peace - but there is no peace. The war is actually begun." Therefore, when he was asked in 1776 to draft the Declaration of Independence he appreciated that to get the acceptance he wanted there was the need for a bold, dramatic, universally appealing statement that would arouse the colonies to action.

After 1775, Jefferson never again made an reference to the concept that all men are created equal. In 1787 while he was a Minister in France the final Constitution of the United States was drawn up. After reviewing the proposed draft of the Constitution, Jefferson urged James Madison to become the leader in developing a Bill of Rights as part of the Constitution thereby making it more acceptable to all the voters. However, while offering thoughts on the rights of man, Jefferson does not again

bring up the concept that all men are created equal as he did in 1776. In addition, in 1789 while in France, he was an adviser to Lafayette in drawing up a Bill of Rights for the French people after the Revolution. Again, the thrust was the same with emphasis on the rights of man, not that they should be treated as all created equal.

Therefore, while Jefferson's liberal political philosophy recognized that there was a necessity to improve the average man's position in society, did he ever really envision a situation where everyone was assumed to be equal? When his draft was accepted as the Declaration of Independence, did all the signatories believe this and have a concept that the definition of "men" referred to all the populous of the colonies or that it was just one's peers that were equal?

Part Four

In conclusion, the Declaration of Independence is a great and magnificent document and was key in uniting the 13 colonies in 1776 at a time in American Revolution when the outlook was bleak. However, it was not meant to be a piece of legislation. Have politicians of recent years taken the statement that "all men are created equal" for political reasons or do they truly believe and act as if it were true. Has this concept created false expectations among people and particularly the minorities that they have not only equal rights but also equal potential as everyone else? Do we really believe that we are all equal in potential? After two hundred years of experience, has it been determined that all men are created equal? And if they are not, can there be equality among men?

It appears that this statement from the Declaration of Independence has so influenced us over the years that we have created unnecessary problems in our society and particularly in our education system. We are hearing that we are creating generations of people who not received an real education suited to their needs or potential, despite enormous sums money spent by the Government.

It is being recognized that our society will pay a high price for this for a long time. In a recent book, "The Closing of the American Mind," by Allan Bloom, he states that "Equality is a democratic prejudice" and an obstacle to the contemplation of higher things. Hopefully, with more understanding, our learning and political institutions will adapt to reality and see that the true rights of man are better achieved by recognizing that we are not all equal.

I am looking forward to your views on this question.