Equality: Commitment or Ideal?

By Willmoore Kendall | August 20th, 2012 | Categories: Abraham Lincoln, Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Featured, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Politics, Willmoore Kendall | Tags: 1IR

> *The whole case for our commitment to equality as a national goal comes from an isolated phrase—"all men are created equal"—in the Declaration of Independence. Was Lincoln right in his exposition of this phrase in the Gettysburg Address?*

The idea is as old, of course, as that magical first sentence of the Gettysburg Address: "Fourscore and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and"—but here we must begin to underline—*"dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal*." Nay, older: Lincoln had used the idea, time and again, in his speeches on slavery (which both were and were not "anti-slavery," both were and were not "egalitarian" in any sense that, say, a present-day liberal college professor would recognize as egalitarian); after Gettysburg, the idea rapidly acquired *sensu stricto*, biblical status, which is to say: Like many perplexing sentences in Holy Scripture, it now comes readily to the lips—all too readily, one is tempted to say—as a statement that (a) must be correct, somehow, or one wouldn't hear it so often from such highly authoritative quarters, and (b) need not, cannot, be acted upon, because we are so far from clear as to what they mean. The idea has, so far as I know, never been challenged, directly anyhow—partly, no doubt, for the reason I've just mentioned, namely: No one, over the main part of the long pull, has ever suggested that over and above freeing the slaves on the one hand, and running free public schools on the other, we have been supposed actually to do anything about it. Today, however, with people making noises to the effect that we must do something about it, we can hardly avoid the obligation to take a second (or perhaps a first?) look at it.

Lincoln's statement, we notice at once, breaks down into four distinct—to use his own words—"propositions." First, the United States, as a nation, was born in 1776. Second, the United States was conceived in liberty. Third, the United States, in the very act of being born was "dedicated" to an overriding purpose—that is, began its life with an understanding of its own meaning that is best expressed in a single supreme symbol. Fourth, that the proposition to which we are dedicated is "all men are created equal," and the supreme symbol that expresses our meaning as a nation is "equality." To which we may add a Fifth—add because it is not actually present in Lincoln's formulation, but is, clearly, the conclusion to which the other four propositions are intended to lead. Fifth, that we Americans—in the absence of an express repudiation or modification of the "proposition" of the Declaration of Independence (I suppose no one would deny our capacity to repudiate or modify it)—are committed to equality; collectively committed to equality as a national goal, and, insofar as we are true Americans, individually committed to it as a good that we are called upon to promote even when, on personal grounds, we should prefer not to.

The four propositions are, I think, distinct and separable, in the sense that one of them might be valid and three of them invalid, two valid and two invalid, etc. Put otherwise: we do not need, in order to call one or another of them into question (as I am, evidently, about to do), to call them all into question; and perhaps I had best speak, first, of those of the four—or, if you like, five—that I not only do not call into question, but whole-heartedly adopt as part of my own political creed.

(a) The United States was, indeed, as a new nation—nor could the idea be more nobly expressed than it is in Lincoln's language—"conceived in liberty." So—ever since we Americans have been a nation and have sought to explain to ourselves our meaning as a nation—so, I say,

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Irrational Forces: Christopher Dawson on the Modern Age we have always put it; so, I hope, we will continue to put it so, both to ourselves, and to the world. Our roots, as a nation, are struck deep in the soil of liberty, the freedom to govern ourselves, that we had lately wrested from the British, and the high aspiration to infuse—in the act of governing ourselves—the spirit and habits and philosophy of liberty into the minds and hearts of all Americans so soon as that may be done. Liberty—liberty in the peculiar American understanding of the word liberty, liberty that is to say and not, liberté, is of the very essence of American political tradition, and Lincoln did well to remind his listeners, at Gettysburg, that that is true, and true in part because of the way in which, as a nation, we sprung into being, because of our origins. For it was certainly love of liberty, the determination to govern themselves, that impelled the thirteen colonies to rebel against Britain, and bring about the state of affairs in which the founding fathers, our founding fathers, could accomplish their great design. No one understands America, and the meaning of America, unless he understands that it was conceived in liberty—nay, born in liberty, nurtured in liberty, and grown to fullness and maturity in liberty. Had Lincoln let it go at that, I should not be taking issue with the first sentence of the Gettysburg address.

(b) The American nation was indeed, in the act of being born, dedicated to an overriding purpose, did indeed declare its subordination to a supreme symbol; and—for that is Lincoln's tacit premise—clarity as to the nature of that overriding purpose, penetration of the meaning of that supreme symbol, should indeed be our primary concern, both collectively and individually. If that was true in Lincoln's day, as it certainly was, it is doubly true in our day, when — thanks, I think, in large part to Lincoln himself—we not only do not possess such clarity and penetration, but make a public display of our confusion both as to our overriding purpose and as to the meaning of our supreme symbol. For let us not deceive ourselves about that: Today we do make, and make constantly, a public display of our confusion: as to who—what kind of people—we actually are, of our uncertainty as to the task that we have come into history to perform. We hesitate over a great national decision — as, for example, we hesitate today in Vietnam? Our hesitation and bumbling is a confession, a confession to ourselves and to the world, that we have lost our sense of identity, and lost it—I borrow the phrase from Courtney Murray—in the way the schizophrenic has lost his sense of identity, so that we have not one but two answers to the question: Who—what manner of being—are you? We have deeply divided counsels over a choice between alternatives bearing deeply upon our destiny as a people, as to the kind of society we are to become. Our counsels are deeply divided—as when, these days, are they not—because, again like the schizophrenic, we cannot answer the posterior question "what shall we do about this?" because there is conflict within us over the prior question (which, once more like the schizophrenic, we are reluctant to haul out into the open), "what are we to do in general?" And again I can say: Had that been the point Lincoln went to Gettysburg to make, I should not be picking a quarrel with him about that magic first sentence; for that too is a major tenet in my own political creed. We do have an overriding purpose, and cannot too often remind ourselves what it is.

So, finally, with the fifth of our five points, the point that follows logically from the other four, namely: That we Americans are committed, collectively and individually, to the overriding purpose that we adopted, and proclaimed to the world, at the moment of our founding; that, if I may put it so, we are mortgaged, collectively and individually, to that overriding purpose; that the obligation to keep up the payments on the relevant obligation runs so to speak, with the land we inhabit; that we inherit that obligation along with our citizenship, our way of life, and the institutions devised for us by our founding fathers; and that nothing short of a solemn act of national deliberation—an act of deliberation no less solemn, no less national, than that by which we first became a nation and first embraced our overriding purpose can release us from that obligation (Lincoln, I am saying, certainly believed something very like all that, and I believe it too.) There are, as I am aware, great difficulties here— difficulties that, as the students of political theory well know, have at all times dogged the steps of political philosophers who grounded political obligation, in whole or in part, in consent; and we should, I think, pause for a moment and remind ourselves what the main difficulty, as old as Locke, actually is: The men of generation "A"—the generation, say of the American founding fathers—establish a political society; they pose, and answer for themselves, the important questions (what kind of political society is it to be? How is it to be governed?). They set the new political society in motion with the consent—most probably, as in our own case, with the enthusiastic approval—of the men of that generation; and the latter, in the very act of giving their consent and approval, commit themselves to that kind of political society, that form of government, that definition of the business which, as a society, they are in. They have, in giving their consent, promised to obey the laws of the society as, in Rousseau's phrase, commands that they give to themselves; they have, by a free act of their own wills, embraced as their very own, the principles upon which, tacitly or explicitly, the society is founded: they have, in a word, so situated themselves that if, on some later day, one of them is tempted to say "Look, all this is

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The conservative is concerned, first of all, with the regeneration of the spirit and character—with the perennial problem of the inner order of the soul, the restoration of the ethical understanding, and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded. This is conservatism at its highest. – Russell Kirk proving more costly than I had expected it to," or "Look, you are asking me to go along with things that, in my view, contravene the principles we have embraced"—if on some later day it comes to that, his fellows can turn to him and say, say, moreover, with good conscience, "ah! But you promised—in the very act of giving your consent you promised—and we call upon you now to keep your promise, that is, not begrudge the sacrifice that our kind of society, with this form of government and this purpose, or set of purposes, now demands of you." He is, if I may put it so, stuck with that earlier act of consent; and if, subsequently, he refuses to fulfill the relevant obligation, and his fellow citizens—as fellow citizens are wont to do—take it out of his hide for his refusal, he has no one to blame but himself. (They are, as Rousseau put it, forcing him to be free; nor, I think, has America ever viewed the question differently from Rousseau.)

The difficulties arise when we put the question not about the generation of the founding fathers, but about subsequent generations, not about the individual to the principles to which it was dedicated, who gave his consent to the founding but about that individual's son, and grandson, and great-great-grandson, down to the Vietnik at Berkeley who, at the margin, will ask: Just when and where did I give my consent—to anything; and if I have not given it, how can anyone say that I am obligated? I will not be ruled by the Dead Hand of the past. Now: the consent philosophers, beginning with Locke and including the framers of the Philadelphia Constitution, have ended up answering that question as follows: By remaining within the territorial limits of America, by accepting the protection of its government, by exercising the rights our legal system confers upon you and enjoying the benefits of the duties it imposes upon others, you have given your consent, as your forefathers gave their consent—in your case, to be sure, tacitly not explicitly, but in a manner that makes it not less binding upon you than it was upon them; you, too, are stuck with it. Nothing of the kind, replies the Vietnik: What you call my tacit consent, which you claim I give by mere physical presence upon American territory, has in fact been forced out of me; I have had no choice but to give it. Ah! replies the philosopher of consent (who knows that Locke's answer is not wholly convincing, and has, therefore, modified and extended it in a couple of ways) —Ah!, but you did have a choice. Ours, like other free countries leaves people free to migrate, to shake our dust off their feet, any time they like; you know that as well as a grown person. Yet we see no sign of your opting for Australia, where you can herd sheep, or for Central America, where you can grow cotton; your decision—and surely it was yours, not anybody else's—to remain amongst us re-enacted the gesture of the men of the founding fathers' generation, and we can interpret it only as a tacit acceptance, on your part, of the same commitments that oblige the rest of us. More—so the framers of the Constitution of the United States to the Vietniks, who may well deny that those commitments oblige even the "rest of us"—more: you must not forget Article V of our Constitution, which leaves us the American people free, as time goes on, to repudiate or revise the commitments we inherit from the past; in the act of not revising the commitments handed down to us by the generation of the founding fathers, we have tacitly made them our own; but, if you like, *acquiescing* in them, we have imposed them on ourselves. More still: we maintain, in these matters, a very considerable degree of freedom of speech—a discussion process, which so to speak *invites* individual Americans like yourself, who seek revision of our traditional commitments, to get out and persuade other Americans that those commitments should be set aside; you have either accepted that invitation, and failed to win over any significant number of your fellow Americans to your point of view (in which case, (a) their acquiescence, as we have just noted, expresses their tacit acceptance of the traditional commitments, and (b) your very exercise of your right to participate in the discussion process obligates you to accept, from moment to moment, the verdicts at which it arrives) or you have not accepted the invitation, not attempted to win others over to your point of view, in which case, again, you have no business taking exception to the verdict by pretending that no commitment exists. You, personally, nevertheless repudiate the commitment? Well—so the generality of Americans, as I understand them, to the Vietnik —that does indeed create a difficult situation, but one that we see only one way to handle; either you mean that you do in fact wish to emigrate, and live amongst us no longer, in which case you will probably find us reasonable enough; or you don't mean that you wish to emigrate, in which case we shall treat you, and with good conscience believe us, as *if* your commitments were the same as ours, and will take it out of your hide if you try to behave as if they were not. (We will, for instance, march you off to the war in Vietnam, regardless of your personal opinion as to whether our commitments as a nation warrant our presence in Vietnam, or, if you prefer, we will march you off to jail.)

Let us, at this point, pause to take our bearings: With two of the four explicit propositions set forth in the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address—the United States was conceived in liberty, the United States, in the fact of being born, was dedicated to an overriding purpose—I am in fullest agreement. So too with that fifth proposition, *not* explicit in the Gettysburg

Address but "there" nevertheless as a conclusion intended to flow from the explicit four: The commitment involved in our dedication to an overriding purpose is, so to speak, *hereditary*. Each generation of Americans hands the commitments along, if I may put it so, to the next generation, which can repudiate or modify it only by the same kind of *solemn act*—but let me, as I repeat that phrase "solemn act," now emphasize it in a way that I have not done before—by the same kind of solemn act by which the commitment became our commitment to begin with; in the absence of such a solemn act, the commitment, lying as it does at the heart of our political tradition, runs with the American land, as does the obligation, an obligation that is simultaneously collective and individual, to do something about the commitment, to forward the overriding purpose, to make sacrifices for it and, when that becomes necessary, to die for it. The alternative—as Lincoln appears to have seen it—is to say that the meaning of America is that it has no meaning, that those who have shed blood in our wars, or given unselfishly of their time and energies in order to be about the nation's business, shall indeed have done so "in vain." So far, I say, *with* Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address; but *not*, I hasten to add, one step further; for the remaining two of our four propositions are, from the standpoint of the American political tradition, *heretical*, and the moment is long overdue, for exposing them as what they are, namely, *heresies* and, worse still, heresies decked out in precisely the kind of plausible and apparently innocuous rhetoric that enables heresies to pass themselves off as restatements of the *truths* that they distort, and caricature, and so degrade and deny.

Let us look first at Heresy Number One: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fore-fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation...." Now: Lincoln speaks in 1863; fourscore and seven years ago translates— from Biblical language into plain English— into the number 87. Subtract 87 from 1863—we do not know how many of the audience at Gettysburg could do simple arithmetic in their heads, but we may be sure Lincoln could—subtract 87 from 1863 and what you get, of course, is 1776, that is, the date of the Declaration of Independence, and what you end up with is the proposition: The founding fathers did their work in the year 1776; the "new nation" the United States of America was established through the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence—to which, accordingly, we must look if we would understand the origins and thus the meaning of our political experience as a single people, organized for action in history and capable of defining its appointed role in history; and—for we must, with heads appropriately bowed, follow the logic where it leads us—the Declaration of Independence suddenly acquires (and remember: we do not use this term lightly, we Americans) *constitutional status,* suddenly becomes a document—*the* document—to which we properly turn in order to learn what our commitments are. That, if I may put it so without seeming flippant, is what the Man says.

Now, let me not compound Lincoln's acts of *heresy* with, on my own part, an act of *impiety*: July 4th, 1776 is a sacred moment in the history of the English-speaking people on this side of the Atlantic; let us celebrate it, in the future as in the past, with firecrackers, oratory, and libations. It is, moreover, a sacred moment because it is the day on which the Declaration of Independence was signed; let us continue, in the future as in the past, to quote from the Declaration of Independence, to publish it in our anthologies—or even, though few of us have ever done that, to sit down now and then and actually read it, if only to find out what it says. More: let us not hesitate, if and when that becomes necessary for our self-understanding as a people, to seize upon a delicate and well-threaded needle to embroider it, it and the events surrounding it, with a bit of myth, since nothing is more beneficent in the life of a nation than the myths that drive home the truths and aspirations that it embodies. But that, as a moment's reflection will convince you, is not what Lincoln did in that opening phrase at Gettysburg; what he did, rather, was to falsify the facts of history, and to do so in a way that precisely *confuses* our self-understanding as a people. The facts, as it happens, are extremely simple and, moreover, well-known to all of us save as we fall under the spell of Lincoln's rhetoric: The Declaration of Independence, as signed at Philadelphia, declared the independence of "the thirteen United States of America"—the independence not of a nation but of a baker's dozen of new sovereignties; "united" to be sure, but not as Oxfordshire and Lincolnshire, or even England and Wales were united, but united rather in a loose confederation that each of the thirteen states was free, and clearly understood to be free, to go along with or not to go along with. (Tom Paine, to be sure, will soon initiate, in *The Crisis*, the falsification that Lincoln will attempt to nail down, once and for all, at Gettysburg, by speaking of the Confederation as if it *were* a nation; nor is it necessary to my position to deny either (a) that there were men present at Philadelphia who were already thinking in national not confederational terms, or (b) that the language of the Declaration includes, here and there, a phrase intended to give those men hope and encouragement, or (c) that the Declaration was

"conceived in liberty," which indeed it was.) The Declaration was, in short, just what its plain language shows it to be, namely: a notice served on the government of Great Britain that thirteen of the English colonies were dissolving the political bonds that had hitherto connected them with Great Britain, that, as I put it a moment ago, they—not *it*, but *they*—were henceforth going to govern *themselves*, and not be governed, or rather misgoverned, from faraway London. The Declaration is not only not a constitution, that is, a solemn act by which a people, having identified itself as a *single* people, *constitutes* itself as a nation; it does not, even by remote implication, pretend to be a constitution. What it does, if I may repeat myself once again, is to bring into being the state of affairs in which, eleven long years later, our founding fathers were to *initiate* the series of steps by which we were to bring ourselves forth—not, if you please, be brought forth—as a nation. To ask or claim more than that for it is, I contend, an act of *political heresy*, compounded by an *act of impiety* toward the nation's true founding fathers, who were the men who wrote, and submitted for ratification by the American people, the Philadelphia Constitution. The Gettysburg Address should begin with the words: "Three score and sixteen years ago "(Nobody, incidentally, knew that better than the Lincoln of the "House Divided," who had spoken repeatedly of the need—mark the words—the need, there in the mid-nineteenth century, for a "new act of founding" which would transcend the work of the actual founding fathers and return the nation to its first principle [that is, the principles Lincoln sees in the Declaration). For Lincoln, that is to say, the *founding fathers* were the heretics, responsible, in Eric Voegelin's phrase, for a derailment of the American experience. Nor does Lincoln leave us in any doubt as to the identity of the founding father of the "new act of founding.")

So much for the first of the two Lincoln propositions with which I am taking issue; and, happily (since my time grows short) we have, in disposing of it, largely disposed of the second one: "[The] new nation,,, [was] dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Here we can rely not primarily on a simple appeal to history but a simple appeal to logic. If the Declaration of Independence did not bring forth a new nation, as it certainly did not, if it was *not* a solemn act by which a single people constituted itself an agent for action in *history*, then we cannot tear *from* the Declaration—that is, tear from its proper context—a single proposition, and do with it what Lincoln tries to do with the words "all men are created equal"; and if we cannot, then the whole case for our commitment to equality as a national goal crashes to the ground. We have *no* such commitment (unless—I do not exclude the possibility—we have acquired it at some later date); we have, collectively and individually, *no* obligation to promote the overriding purpose; the whole business is a further Lincolnian heresy, accompanied by a further Lincolnian act of impiety toward the founding fathers. The relevant considerations, over and above those I have mentioned, would appear to be these:

First, even if the Declaration of Independence *did* put itself forward as a claimant for constitutional status, even if it *did* claim the kind of "rank" that would make of it a proper place to look for our national commitments, we should be obliged (however reluctantly some of us) to refuse that claim—and for this reason: It is not a "solemn act" in the sense I have intended where, in the foregoing, I have used that phrase to describe the kind of act by which we in America acquire, or repudiate, or modify, a commitment, or an overriding purpose, or a supreme symbol. Such a solemn act must, as *The Federalist* puts the point so well, be an expression of the deliberate—deliberate, mind you—the deliberate *sense* of the American people; and we the American people worked out, in our very infancy as a people, the ground rules for recognizing an expression of the deliberate sense of the American people on matters of major import. Such an expression begins with—as we should expect—*deliberation*, by one or more duly-accredited representatives. More: just as Newton, according to the old story, when he said "Scat" to his cats, meant "Scat," so we in America, when we say "deliberation," mean—deliberation, that is, cool, crisp, rational, sustained discussion of the alternative courses of action apparently open to us, of the probable consequences of our adopting this course of action instead of that one, of the arguments pro and con. The more important the problem—so the works of our political tradition would seem to suggest—the longer that deliberation is likely to take, and the mire the discussion is likely to take place on the floor of the Assembly or Assemblies, not in committees. The Assembly, moreover, does not deem itself, where the matter in hand is a grave matter, as authorized, in and of itself, to perform the entire solemn act; rather it submits its handiwork to us the people for what, since Philadelphia, we have called "ratification" by our local, that is, state representatives. Strictly speaking, therefore—since in its absence the proposal lapses—we the people, and only we the people, perform the solemn acts by which we impose lasting commitments upon ourselves. Now: the contrast, on this showing, between the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, could not be more obvious. Far from being the work of a representative assembly the Declaration is the work (and who is more eager to remind us of that than the Declaration's glorifiers?) not merely of a committee, but of a committee that, largely, turned its responsibilities over to a single committee member—on the (for me at least) preposterous grounds that he was the most facile writer of the bunch; the Assembly itself, as the Declaration's chief glorifiers proudly boast, had very little to do with it. The whole affair was hasty—witness the conspicuous solecism, the like of which is to be found in no other great American document, in the first paragraph, a matter of hours not, as at Philadelphia, weeks; and such discussion as occurred was not, as at Philadelphia, over matters of high principle, but over tiny questions of detail. In a word: the Declaration's credentials as a solemn act, an expression of the deliberate sense of the American people, leave much to be desired, and far too much to support the claim that it is a national commitment.

Secondly, even if the Declaration's credentials as an act of deliberation *were* unexceptionable—even if it *had* been ratified by the American people as the act by which it constituted itself as a nation—even if it *possessed* therefore, the constitutional status *sensu stricto* that Lincoln attributes to it at Gettysburg—even if it *were* a proper place to look for our commitments as a nation—I say that Lincoln is unwarranted in reading out of it a commitment to equality as a national goal or purpose, to say nothing of an *overriding* national purpose. Put otherwise: we have only to look at the actual words the Declaration uses in order to see that the only way you can read such a commitment out of it is by first reading it into it—which, I contend, is just what Lincoln did. "We" it says in point of fact, "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 proposition "all men are created equal" is—I shan't burden you with further quotation—if we look closely, only one of five propositions that the Declaration's framers list as a sort of *creed*, a corpus of basic beliefs, that the people of America put forward as *their* creed, *their* corpus of basic beliefs (the less said about those words "self-evident," let me say in passing, the better; as I hope to show in another place the "self-evident" had best be reserved for the fact that the tenets of the creed—perhaps because of the haste with which it was pieced together—are in part self-contradictory, or at least cannot keep house together). None of them is properly speaking what I should call an explicit declaration of purpose, and if purposes are what we are looking for we shall have to settle for an *implied* purpose, or determination if you like, to maintain, in the new state of affairs that the Declaration brings into being, governments that will (a) secure men's in-alienable rights, and (b) derive their powers from the consent of the governed. Finally the word "dedicated" is conspicuously absent, and unless you want to make something of the fact that it is the first tenet of the creed, not the second or third or fourth or fifth, the proposition "all men are created equal" is given no claim to priority over the other four. Here, just as with "new nation," Lincoln is playing games—that is, taking unwarranted liberties with the text he professes to be construing

Thirdly—but we must add now to our "even ifs"—even *if* the Declaration possessed constitutional status, even *if* it began with a recitation of goals and purposes, even *if* we let Lincoln father off onto the Declaration his "dedicated to the proposition that"—we should still have to raise the following pretty urgent points:

(a) The proposition "all men are created equal" is so ambiguous as to merit classification as, for all practical purposes, meaningless and therefore useless—especially if, in reading it, we take into account the time at which it was written. The phrase "all men," to begin with, is by no means so simple and unambiguous as (for reasons too complicated to go into on this occasion) it is likely to seem to the unsuspecting undergraduate in 1967. The Declaration's framers might have written, but chose not to write, "each man is created equal to every other man," and they might have added, but did not add, "and therefore ought to be treated, for governmental purposes, as the equal of every other man." Much has been made, as some of you know, even or perhaps especially by the glorifiers of the Declaration, of the fact that the assembly that approved the Declaration suppressed the passionate denunciation of slavery that Jefferson wrote into the original draft (how could they, critics ask, have been so "inconsistent," or, variously, how could they have been so "hypocritical"— is it not obvious that if you believe that "all men are created equal" you have got to denounce slavery?) Either the one, or the other: they were poor logicians, or they were hypocrites, that is, vicious men paying the vicious man's normal tribute to virtue. Yet, curiously, very little has been made of the fact—one doesn't need to be particularly nimble intellectually to recognize its relevance—that the Declaration of Independence not only does not denounce slavery, it does not denounce the inferior status of women either, for all that it seems obvious to us that if all men are created equal all women are created equal, too. You will, of course, see my point even before I get around to make it; even the Levellers of Cromwell's armies, the truly radical egalitarians, who like the Declaration made free with the expression "all men" and "every man" *and* with claims for equal rights had left out women (as, also, "servants" and those who had fought against Cromwell)—the Levellers, indeed, used as a variant for "all men" the expression "every he" that is in England. There is, in other words, a third possible explanation for the suppression of Jefferson's denunciation of slavery, namely, that the men who approved the Declaration did not mean by "all men" what their critics choose to mean by "all men," but rather, like the Levellers, something more like "all men that count" (the claim for equal political rights put forward by the *Virginia* Declaration, on the eve of the Declaration of Independence, had been confined to those who had demonstrated their permanent attachment to the Commonwealth)—which would make them guilty neither of inconsistency, nor of hypocrisy, but simply (a) of using language differently from their intellectual betters, that is, ourselves, and (b) of not entertaining political opinions congruent with those of members of Americans for Democratic Action. There are, I say then, difficulties about "all men." But there are also difficulties about the words "are created equal." Do they indeed mean that "all men," or "ail men who count" ought to be created equally? Do they mean merely—for that is a real possibility—merely that "all men" or "all men who count" are created equal in the sight of God? Do they mean merely that "all men" or "all men who count" are treated with an equal right to justice? It is, I fear, anybody's guess, for no answer is to be found in the text of the Declaration of Independence. And so we come back to the main point; no proposition that comes so near to being meaningless can possibly do service as an overriding national purpose.

Fourthly, even if we withdraw the objection that the proposition to which we are allegedly "dedicated" is meaningless—keeping, meantime, all our other "even ifs"—there remains *this* point that we have heard curiously little about from our egalitarian political scientists and historians. The founding fathers at Philadelphia, who *did* deliberate, and *did* produce a document in which we the American people *do* constitute ourselves a nation, and *did* dedicate us to an overriding purpose, and *did* submit their handiwork for ratification by Us the American people, certainly had in front of them the Declaration of Independence, certainly—since the war that had made possible the steps they were about to take had been fought under the Declaration of Independence—certainly I say had at some point to face the question "What are we going to do about the Declaration of Independence?," and seem to have decided—well, two possibilities: either first to ignore it (they *do* make no reference to it or repeat any of its Language), or, second, to, if I dare say it, *repudiate* it—by forestalling any appeal back of it, and to its credo, of the kind that Lincoln is to make in the mid-nineteenth century. "We *the* people of the United States," they write, so bringing forth a new nation, "do ordain and establish this constitution"—so the nation is constituted, organized, as an agent for action upon the stage of history (I vary the order, but without infidelity to the text)—"*in order to*"—and so we the American people adopt, by our own free act, an overriding purpose, a supreme symbol, a commitment that is truly *ours* unless and until we repudiate or modify it—" in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Union, Justice, Domestic Tranquility, The Common Defense, The blessings of Liberty. Never mind that the overriding purpose is a six-fold purpose—nations that get it into their heads that there is one good, other than salvation, that merits absolute priority over all other goods, are sure to come to a bad end—as, happily, we have not. (Well, not *yet*, anyhow.) Never mind, either, that the six-fold purpose is pretty obviously cribbed from Medieval Catholic political philosophy—there are worse wells to carry your jugs to (for example: the John Locke well that the framers of the Declaration carried *their* jug to). In short: I find myself unable to read the Preamble of the Constitution (which we have never repudiated, never revised) as other than an express repudiation of the tenet of the Declaration's creed that might seem to commit us somehow to equality.

And I conclude: The Declaration of Independence does *not* commit us to equality as a national goal—for more reasons than you can shake a stick at.

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