



***Perspectives from FSF Scholars
July 4, 2025
Vol. 20, No. 30***

**The Declaration of Independence:
"The Sheet Anchor of American Republicanism"**

by

Randolph J. May *

[Washington Examiner](#)

July 4, 2025

There is no time when the Declaration of Independence's true meaning is not worthy of deep reflection. But certainly this Independence Day, which marks the beginning of a year of celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration's signing, is a worthy occasion for such reflection.

To be sure, there's no shortage of commentary to spur thinking about the Declaration's meaning. Anything Thomas Jefferson, the document's principal author, said about the Declaration warrants close attention of course. But here I want to consider the words of two very different presidents living in two different centuries – Abraham Lincoln and Calvin Coolidge.

At one of his many stops on his way to Washington to be inaugurated for the first time, President-elect Lincoln spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on February 22, 1861, which happens to be George Washington's birthday. In brief remarks – Lincoln told his audience it was a "wholly unprepared speech" – he declared: "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

This claim was not just political hyperbole –what you might expect to hear from a politician who happened to be speaking in Independence Hall – for Lincoln frequently invoked the Declaration throughout his entire adult life. It was at the core of his understanding of the American experiment.

Nowhere was this understanding more fully explicated than in his address in Peoria, Illinois, on October 16, 1854. The [Peoria Address](#), which marked Lincoln's reentry into politics and thrust him into the national debate over slavery, was his response to passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which voided a restriction on the extension of slavery that had been part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

At Peoria, Lincoln grounded his extended argument against slavery firmly in the philosophy and principles expounded in the Founders' Declaration of 1776, not in the Constitution of 1787.

While Lincoln referred to the Declaration often throughout his more than three-hour long Peoria Address, significantly, he made the heart of his argument the true core of the Declaration:

What I do say is, that no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*. I say this is the leading principle---the sheet anchor of American republicanism. Our Declaration of Independence says:

'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, DERIVING THEIR JUST POWERS FROM THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED.' [The italics and ALL CAPS are in Lincoln's original draft of the speech.]

Calling the Declaration's equality principle the "sheet anchor of American republicanism" conjures up uniquely memorable imagery – which coming from Lincoln doesn't surprise us.

But the eloquence of Calvin Coolidge, our 30th president, speaking at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 5, 1926, at the celebration of the Declaration's 150th anniversary, may surprise. After all, his not-so-subtle nickname was "Silent Cal."

Titled "[The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence](#)," Coolidge's speech deserves to be much more widely read and appreciated. Here is part of what he said that day regarding the Declaration:

It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed

historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people.

As our nation begins to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we can draw inspiration from the stirring words of Lincoln and Coolidge. And like them, we should be inspired by the words of the Declaration itself – that "sheet anchor of American republicanism" – to make it our cause to ensure that the Truths proclaimed to be self-evident are forever sustained in America.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Potomac, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *The Declaration of Independence: "The Sheet Anchor of American Republicanism"* was published in the *Washington Examiner* on July 4, 2025.