



Perspectives from FSF Scholars
June 25, 2026
Vol. 21, No. 25

U.S. at 250 Should Remember Declaration’s Self-Evident Truths

by

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[The Washington Times](#)

June 24, 2026

America’s 250th birthday is fast approaching, and it is a fitting time to recall the drafting of the [Declaration of Independence](#).

Congress approved the final wording of the document on July 4, 1776. The Declaration is central to understanding the ongoing American democratic experiment, and its meaning is at the heart of what we should be celebrating in the coming weeks.

Without a doubt, the very foundation of the Declaration is what the proclamation calls “these truths,” which it asserts are self-evident.

What are they? The familiar litany, which has become liturgical, is “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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The Lockean notion that, to be just, governments must derive their powers from the “consent of the governed” is one of the anchoring legs of the truths proclaimed in the Declaration.

In his book "[The Radicalism of the American Revolution](#)," Gordon Wood, widely acknowledged as the preeminent chronicler of America's founding era, contended that the revolution "did not just eliminate monarchy and create republics" but also "brought about an entirely new kind of popular politics."

In an [essay](#) published in the National Review earlier this year, Wood wrote that, in the Declaration, the Founders "put down five significant words that came to define America's culture — 'all men are created equal.'"

Wood said, "No phrase could have been more radical, more momentous."

Of course, the Declaration's five words proclaiming the equality principle as a self-evident truth did not match the reality, at the time, of the existence of chattel slavery. Still, the principle was inscribed on what soon became sacred parchment. Thus, it became embedded in what Wood called a "new republican consciousness" — so that "within decades of the Declaration, the United States became the most egalitarian nation in the world."

President Lincoln regularly invoked the Declaration's principle of equality in his speeches, arguing against slavery at Peoria, Illinois, in 1854 and in the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. Lincoln grounded his argument squarely on the Declaration's words: "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."

President Coolidge, sometimes called "Silent Cal," said little that was superfluous. His address, "[The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence](#)," delivered in Philadelphia on July 5, 1926, at a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Declaration's adoption, contained not one superfluous word.

Coolidge asserted: "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."

What did the Declaration's drafters mean when they called the rights inherent in the equality and other principles "self-evident" truths? They meant that these rights were derived from the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," not from grant by any government. These rights predate the establishment of government and exist apart from any government sanction.

That is what Coolidge meant when he said: "If all men are created equal, that is final."

For quite some time now, it has been in fashion for celebrities, public officials and others to invoke "my truth," usually to excuse inappropriate behavior or remarks. As but one of

numerous examples, in 2019, Kloe Kardashian, in excusing a romantic relationship for which she was criticized, said: “I need to say my truth.”

Notoriously, in 2023, by way of explaining what she wished she had said in her congressional testimony regarding antisemitism on campus, then-Harvard President Claudine Gay declared: “Substantively, I failed to convey what is my truth.”

The Declaration’s self-evident “Truths” are diametrically opposed to the all too common “my truth” claim. Those “my truths” are subjective, variable and highly personal. The Declaration’s self-evident “Truths” are objective, immutable and universal.

Robert Frost, a quintessential American poet, declared: “Most of the change we think we see in life is due to truths being in and out of favor.”

My fervent wish for America as it celebrates its 250th birthday is that the truths proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence remain in favor always.

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