

# **The Literature of the Revolution**

## **The American Testament**

# The American Testament

- What is America?
- Every nation has its saga of its origin
  - The settlers of Jamestown and Plymouth; the War of Independence; The Civil War; The Frontier
- They constitute a kind of sacred history
  - America as a miracle
- The sacred history of its origin is underwritten by equally sacred texts

- Like no other nation, America is founded on texts:
- A) The Bible: The Puritan saga that identifies the settlers with the Chosen People of the Old Testament
- B) The American Testament:
  - i) The Declaration of Independence
  - ii) The Constitution
  - iii) The Gettysburg Address

- The sagas or myths of America have all been challenged by counter-narratives:
- Settlement and Frontier
  - Extermination of the Indian
- American Independence
  - Slavery
- Civil War
  - Segregation of blacks and whites
- But the underlying myths survive
  - Luther King: “I Have a Dream”

# The Declaration of Independence

- **I) The origin of American Independence**
- a) Political thought of the Enlightenment
- b) American experience in local self-government

# The political thought of the Enlightenment

- The English Enlightenment
  - John Locke: A government must protect life, liberty and property; if the government fails to do this, the citizens are entitled to rebel
- The French Enlightenment (Montesquieu)

# American experience in local self-government

- In all local matters, the 13 colonies had effectively governed themselves since the beginning, with little interference from England
- Not a genuine democracy (the vote depended on wealth and social standing)

- **II) Steps to Independence**

- a) 13 colonies, differing geographically, historically, religiously, economically and culturally
- b) Seven Years War (1756-63) → France and Spain are weakened → The Catholic threat is removed
- c) Question of Taxation → The army is needed against Indian rebellions and Britain wants America to pay for its own security

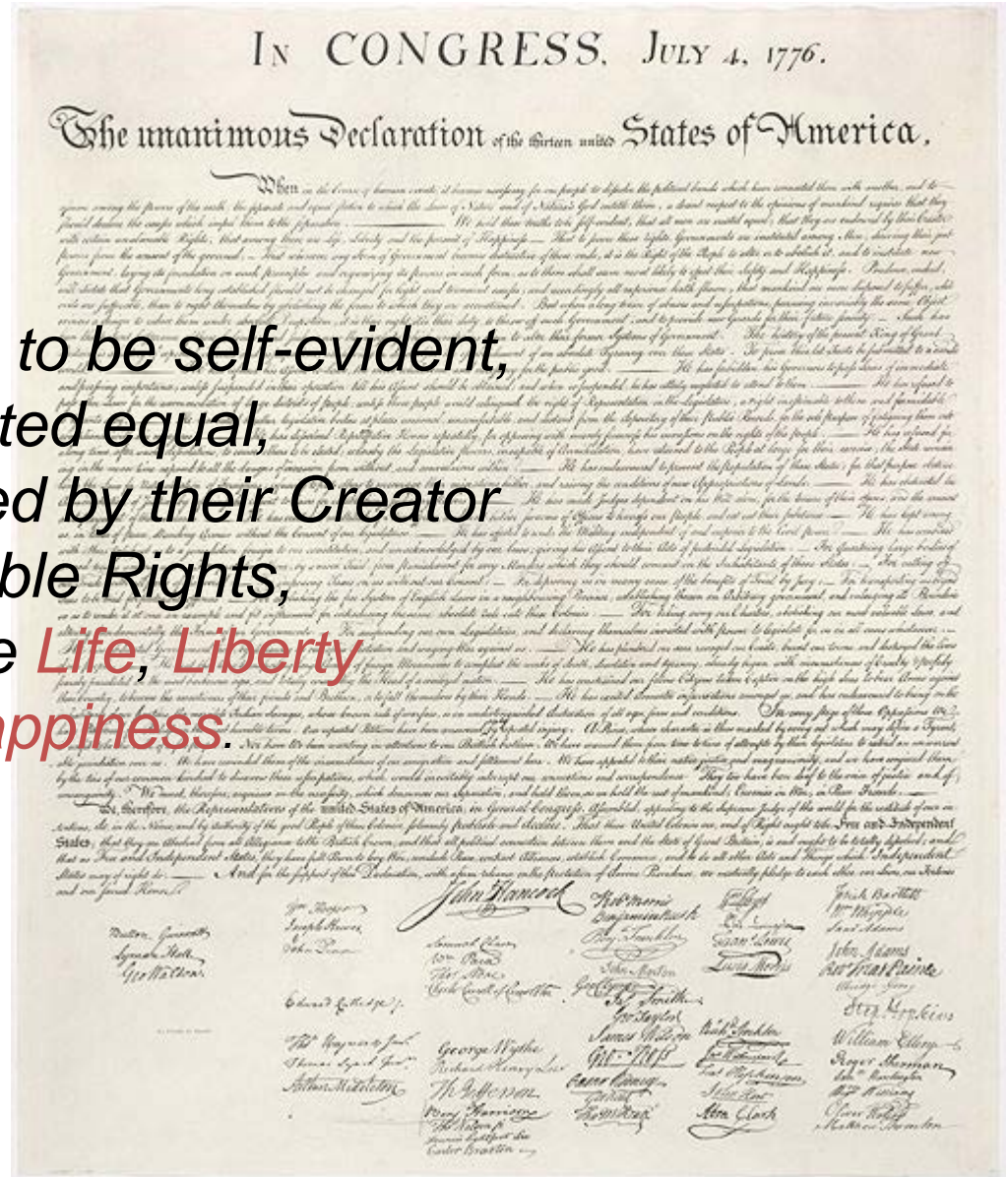


- No Taxation without representation
- 1773: Boston Tea party
- 1774: First Continental Congress → First step towards a union of the 13 colonies (or states)
- 1775: Continental Congressmen are declared traitors by the British Crown.
- Lexington: first armed clash between Patriots and the British.
- The Continental Army is formed, and George Washington is made general

- 1776, January: Thomas Paine publishes “Common Sense” (120.000 copies). The pamphlet provided popular arguments for independence
- 4<sup>th</sup> July: Thomas Jefferson drafts The Declaration of Independence, signed by the Continental Congress

# The Declaration of Independence (1776)

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.**



- With its statement of equality it constitutes a manifesto for democracy
- Lincoln regarded the Declaration of Independence as a pledge for the future, rather than something capable of being realized in 1776
- American history may be read as a sequence of steps leading towards the fulfillment of the principles stated in the Declaration of Independence

- Right from the beginning, America was better placed to achieve true democracy than any European country of its time
- The USA is the first nation without any feudal heritage
- It is the first testing ground for the political ideas of the Enlightenment

- The Revolutionary War ends in 1783.
- The 13 states unite in a loose confederation
- Under the Articles of Confederation, every state is sovereign
- A common cause had united them during the war of independence. Would they remain united in the future, and in what form?

- In 1787, representatives of the 13 states met in Philadelphia to find a way to a “more perfect union”
- The men who are known as The Founding Fathers came up with a unique document: The Constitution of the United States of American
- With the Constitution the *united states of America* became the *United States of America*

- The USA becomes the 1st federally organized state in the world with the first modern constitution
- It was a practical solution arising from the particular need of the American states at that moment in history
- The federal model has since been copied by many other states
- The Constitution has become the blue-print for all other constitutions in the world



# The American Constitution

- The Constitution establishes the separation of powers and invests the three branches of government with the authority they need to fulfill their missions
- America had the great fortune of having some of the most brilliant minds of its time who were involved in public life

- The Constitution was not perfect → A Bill of Rights was added in the form of 10 Amendments, in which the individual's rights were established
- In more than 200 years only 16 further amendments have been added to the Bill of Rights: Abolishing slavery; giving the vote to blacks and later to women; and limiting the Presidency to two terms

- The American Constitution has proved incredibly stable in a country that has grown from 4 million inhabitants in 1783 to over 300 millions – and from 13 to 50 states
- Together with the Bible, it is considered a “sacred” text, the centre-piece of the American Testament

# The Civil War

- The 3rd saga of America
- Slavery stood in glaring contradiction with the principles of the Declaration of Independence
- Many northern states (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania...) had abolished slavery after Independence
- A number of plantation owners (Washington) freed their slaves in their will

- Problems with abolishing slavery:
- After independence in 1783, saving the Union seemed more important than the question of slavery
- Economic question: who would compensate the slave owners?

- In the middle of the 19th century the northern states put mounting pressure on the South to abolish slavery
- The answer of the southern states in 1862 was to break with the Union and form a Confederacy
- The greatest battle of the war was fought in 1863 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (23.000 dead)

# The Gettysburg Address

- Delivered by President Lincoln on the battlefield of Gettysburg, at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery
- It has become one of the greatest political speeches of all times, completing the American Testament

- It reiterates the principles of The Declaration of Independence

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.*

- Principle of democratic government

*Government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*



- After the war, the southern states are forced to give up slavery, but they maintain segregation of blacks and whites and prevents blacks from voting
- The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s seeks to fulfill the aspirations of the Declaration of Independence
- On the first centenary of the Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King delivers one of the most emblematic speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial: “I Have a Dream”

- One of the most striking facts about America is the faith Americans have acquired in their own foundational texts
- America is understood as an ideal, a promise, a project embodied in its three “sacred” political texts



# Bibliography

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