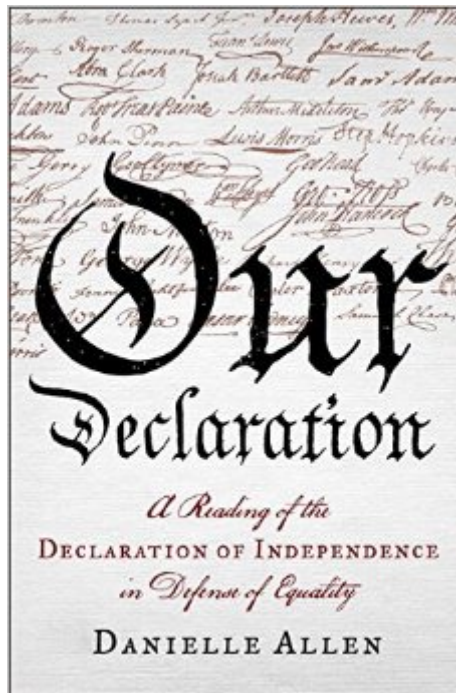


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# Our Declaration: A Reading Of The Declaration Of Independence In Defense Of Equality





## Synopsis

Winner of the ZÃ calo Book Prize Shortlisted for the 2015 PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award  
Winner of the Francis Parkman Prize, Society of American Historians

Danielle Allen lays bare the Declaration's history and significance, returning it to its true and rightful owners— you and me.

In just 1,337 words, the Declaration of Independence altered the course of history. Written in 1776, it is the most profound document in the history of government since the Magna Carta, signed nearly 800 years ago in 1215. Yet despite its paramount importance, the Declaration, curiously, is rarely read from start to finish— much less understood. Troubled by the fact that so few Americans actually know what it says, Danielle Allen, a political philosopher renowned for her work on justice and citizenship, set out to explore the arguments of the Declaration, reading it with both adult night students and University of Chicago undergraduates. Keenly aware that the Declaration is riddled with contradictions— liberating some while subjugating slaves and Native Americans— Allen and her students nonetheless came to see that the Declaration makes a coherent and riveting argument about equality. They found not a historical text that required memorization, but an animating force that could and did transform the course of their everyday lives. In an "uncommonly elegant, incisive, and often poetic primer on America's cardinal text," *Our Declaration* now brings these insights to the general reader, illuminating the "three great themes of the Declaration: equality, liberty, and the abiding power of language" (David M. Kennedy). Vividly evoking the colonial world between 1774 and 1777, Allen describes the challenges faced by John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston— the "Committee of Five" who had to write a document that reflected the aspirations of a restive population and forge an unprecedented social contract. Although the focus is usually on Jefferson, Allen restores credit not only to John Adams and Richard Henry Lee but also to clerk Timothy Matlack and printer Mary Katherine Goddard. Allen also restores the astonishing text of the Declaration itself. Its list of self-evident truths does not end, as so many think, with our individual right to the "pursuit of happiness" but with the collective right of the people to reform government so that it will "effect their Safety and Happiness." The sentence laying out the self-evident truths leads us from the individual to the community— from our individual rights to what we can achieve only together, as a community constituted by bonds of equality. Challenging so much of our conventional political wisdom, *Our Declaration* boldly makes the case that we cannot have freedom as individuals without equality among us as a people. With its cogent analysis and passionate advocacy, *Our Declaration* thrillingly affirms the continuing relevance of America's founding text, ultimately revealing what democracy actually means and what it asks of us. 35



illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

Over the past 200+ years, the popular reputation of our Declaration of Independence has waxed and waned. Oddly enough, since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s it has been in almost total eclipse. Although Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 drew heavily on the idea of human equality, he spoke most frequently in terms of the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. At the same time, the Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal" came under withering attack not only by the women's movement, which choked on the phrase "all men," but also by racial groups who attacked its presumed lily white intentions. Because of those attacks, the bicentennial celebrations in 1976 were more fiasco than festival. When Barack Obama was forced to deal with racial issues in the 2008 campaign for the Democratic nomination, he spoke at Philadelphia "where both the Declaration and the Constitution were drafted" but based his speech entirely on the Constitution. Unlike Abraham Lincoln, who dated the nation's beginning at 1776 with the signing of the Declaration, Obama associated the beginning with the drafting of the Constitution in 1787. Danielle Allen makes it very clear in *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* that



we have impoverished our sense of our nation by ignoring the Declaration. She makes clear the claim of her title that the document remains OUR Declaration, a statement not simply of fundamental values but of a full political philosophy that in fact shaped the Constitution in 1787 and remains our political philosophy. The goal of her book is to enable us to own the Declaration of Independence. To that end Allen provides an exhilarating close reading of the document. Drawing on a decade of experience teaching it in different contexts as a text in literature, philosophy, sociology, or political science, she sets the Declaration carefully in the intense ferment that was the American Revolution. She demonstrates how its meanings arise not simply from the minds of the colonies' best and brightest but from English tyranny as experienced by the mass of the colonists. Without diminishing the importance of Thomas Jefferson's contribution to its elegant rhetoric, she explores the many hands that actually contributed to the creation of a genuinely communal statement of values. She provides a close analysis of the logical structure of the long list of charges against King George, showing how that structure relates to the structure of the entire document. As her subtitle suggests, a central theme of her argument is 'in Defense of Equality.' In her explicitly avowed anti-libertarian analysis, Allen aims to demonstrate that the fallacy of the common libertarian assertion that equality and freedom are competing values. To that end, she argues that freedom cannot exist without equality. The core of that argument is her demonstration throughout the book of the ways in which the actual recognition of equality was fundamental to the social process of creating a government which could secure to each her rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In clear, jargon-free English she provides a vivid awareness of the extent to which the Declaration embodies the deep values developed as British colonists transformed themselves into American citizens. The Constitution provides the machinery of our government, but the Declaration of Independence provides the philosophy that shaped the Constitution and that still informs the fabric of our daily lives. It is a rich and complex American orthodoxy. Restoring the Declaration to national discourse could do much to help us temper our culture wars..

A timely, important and useful work. I especially enjoyed the author's personal notes as they illuminated otherwise tenuous and vague insights, opinions and ideas, she brought the topic alive and into our own day and age. I recommend this book. My singular disappointment was the chapter that dealt with "Nature's God". The god of the Declaration was in fact not the Christian God, it was the god of Spinoza, Nature. I recommend the following book to those who want to follow up. Nature's God, by Matthew Stewart.



This book is about the Founding Fathers attempts to philosophically analyze the two fundamental human rights of political equality and freedom in order to justify the United States' breaking away from the tyranny of an oligarchic Libertarian British rule. Danielle Allen does an excellent job of explaining that this analysis by the Founding Fathers lies at the heart of the Declaration of Independence document or "memo" as she calls it. In doing this work she also draws our attention to the fact that the Founding Fathers failed to prevent the resurgence or re-dominance of that same oligarchic Libertarian mind-set currently now manifest in the United States. Danielle Allen has a sequel book in her to explain this lapse back into political inequality and accompanying negation of freedom. Buy this book it is an important achievement in literary forensic science that shines a spotlight on our true human nature which so few individuals understand.

I caught a bit of Danielle Allen on C-SPAN, was impressed, and bought the book. While it does have merit, all in all it was a letdown. The tedious writing was a major factor—too much repetition and redundancy. Ironical given how much she praises the Declaration's concision (1337 words). To her credit, Allen acknowledges the right of revolution and agrees that the criteria for it was met. Despite various abuses, numerous powder alarms including Lexington-Concord, and the Battle of Bunker Hill, the colonists were long suffering and sent the Olive Branch Petition. Allen rightfully points out that King George refused to receive the petition, issued the Proclamation of Rebellion, and then addressed Parliament. To my dismay she neglects to mention Parliament's ratification—the Prohibitory Act of December 22, 1775. THIS was the nail in the coffin. When word of the Prohibitory Act reaches the colonists about three months later, resistance to independence wanes. And why? Because the old common law covenantal relationship between king and subjects had been severed. A king no longer willing to protect his subjects can no longer demand allegiance. In essence, the king (and Parliament) had declared the colonies independent in fact. The purpose of the Declaration of Independence is to turn that de facto independence into de jure independence. The colonies-now-states need diplomatic recognition to acquire alliances, weapons, and credit. Allen fails to mention this. One other problem. As a political philosopher—Allen has to know that liberty and equality ARE antithetical IF you define equality as equality of results. Equality before the law or of opportunity is NOT antithetical to liberty and that is the kind of (ordered) liberty and equality our American constitutional federal republic is built upon. As a practical matter, liberty will result in material inequality precisely because individuals pursue different callings and/or will differ in their stewardship. Thankfully, she never explicitly



defines equality as equality of results. On the contrary, she occasionally refers to it as "political equality". But that creates another problem. Even though the signers were declaring equal endowment of rights, they were not technically declaring political equality. This was not a democracy but a republic. Moreover, only propertied individuals generally enjoyed the right to vote. There was a reason for this. Just as there ought to be "no taxation without representation", many believed there ought to be "no representation without taxation". In other words, why should a person NOT contributing to the pie have a say in how that pie is distributed? I am not suggesting that people be denied a right to vote but the fact is, not having a right to vote does not necessarily mean your right to life, liberty, property, or the pursuit of happiness is being violated. On a related note, Allen laments how "separate AND equal" became "separate BUT equal" when it came to schooling. Let me make clear, I find segregation abhorrent and think "race" as we understand it in America is a socio-political construct and false. However, the "separate but equal" debate is really about money, specifically the distribution of tax revenue for the purpose of schooling. The assumption is that money equals good schools and good schools equal good education. Of course, this is not true. Home schoolers and private schools prove that you can spend less and still receive a superior education. So again, the issue was equal distribution of property taxes for the purpose of state schooling, which is equality of results. Those who own expensive homes and childless homeowners subsidize the cost of schooling. As a practical matter, the duty to school your neighbor's child now supersedes your God-given right to own property. Should you object to that state-imposed duty, officials will foreclose on your home. One final issue. Allen fails to properly define "happiness". She quotes John Adams but literally stops too short. Adams, like so many Greek, Roman, and Christian scholars, defined happiness in terms of virtue or literally "acting as a man ought to act". Moreover, the signers of the Declaration would have been well acquainted with Sir William Blackstone who said happiness cannot be obtained but by observing the laws of eternal justice. Putting it all together, the virtuous man acts like a man observing the laws of eternal justice; the common good is the result. Blackstone also defined the law of nature: it is the will of his maker. In short, how Allen can hope to define such words without reference to the biblical, natural, and common law tradition is beyond me. There is insight to be had here but do yourself a favor and consider additional sources. Better yet, read Adams, Locke, Blackstone, and others for yourself. P.S. I neglected to mention another significant disagreement. Allen cites political speeches to argue that America obsesses over "liberty" at the cost of "equality". No, Americans love the RHETORIC of liberty but increasingly define it as freedom from want and



fear (FDR). Just think about how many of us are dependent on some level of local, state, and federal spending. Like countless others, America is actually trading liberty--which requires character and responsibility--for so-called security. If we were really as "libertarian" as Allen claims the Constitution would reign and Uncle Sam would be a mere fraction of his current size and scope.

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