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Final Paper

Balancing Equality and Freedom: An Examination of Declarations of Independence

Throughout the history of the United States, Americans have compromised equality for minority groups in order to preserve the freedom of the majority. Since the Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776 calling for greater freedom for the colonists and declaring that “all men are created equal,” our definition of equality has expanded while challenging the freedom of the majority group and demanding greater freedom for the oppressed. The balance between expanding equality without diminishing freedom can be seen by examining how the structure and language of the Declaration of Independence has appeared in the declarations made by minority groups—specifically women and African Americans—throughout history.

The Declaration of Independence expressed the values of the colonists during the American Revolution. As tensions grew between Great Britain and the colonies, many people in the colonies and their delegates to the Continental Congress hoped a reconciliation could be reached while others realized that independence from and revolution against Britain were inevitable. The Continental Congress appointed John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to a committee to draft a formal declaration of independence. The Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776 in Philadelphia and formally declares the colonies’ independence from Britain.¹ The claims made in the document were revolutionary for their time. “By stating the grounds upon which men acted, the Declaration embodied the

¹ Richard Beeman, *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 117-130.

American Revolution.”² In addition to declaring their independence from Great Britain, the colonists used the document to outline the principles they believed in and would be fighting for throughout the Revolutionary War. These principles also serve as the first working definitions of equality and freedom for the nation. By expressing the values the colonists felt were worth fighting for, the Declaration of Independence was revolutionary for its time.

The Declaration of Independence established the working definition of equality in the United States. When the Declaration was being drafted in 1776, equality was a major concern for the colonists. As a result, equality “stood first in the Declaration of Independence.”³ The authors of the Declaration created the first definition of equality for the United States. In the beginning paragraphs, the authors boldly state, “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.”⁴ With this claim, the authors of the Declaration established the first working definition of equality for the independent United States of America. Equality among people means that these people all have the opportunity to live their life as they choose, enjoy the privileges of freedom, and pursue their definition of happiness. Later in the document, the authors emphasize the importance of the “Safety and Happiness” of the people.⁵ Because “Safety” is given the same significance as and mentioned alongside a reiteration of “Happiness,” safety and security of life is another component of equality. The working definition of equality includes life, liberty, happiness, and security.

² William Raymond Smith, “The Rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence,” *College English* 26:4 (1965), 309.

³ William F. Russell, *Liberty vs. Equality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 11.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman, *The Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: Continental Congress, 1776), 4.

⁵ Jefferson et al., 4.

The components of the definition of equality can be seen throughout the Declaration of Independence. Concepts such as life, liberty, happiness, and safety have become “egalitarian symbols of the Declaration of Independence” that are essential in our understanding of equality.⁶ In the final phrase of the document, the colonists assert: “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”⁷ With this final sentence, everyone is committed to supporting and defending the Declaration with everything they have, including their integrity and their life. The word “mutually” implies that all of the colonists are making this commitment, each person’s commitment is valuable, and as a result, the colonists are all equal. Because they are equal, they have the right to determine what they do with their life, liberty, happiness, and safety. In this case, they choose to pledge their most valuable possessions—the foundation of their equality—to the cause of fighting for independence. Equality—the right to liberty and safety and the opportunity to determine the course of one’s life and happiness—is exemplified throughout the Declaration of Independence.

The functional definition of equality established in the Declaration of Independence has some fundamental flaws. In the document, equality is presented as natural and inevitable. When explaining why independence must be declared, the authors reference the “equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them [one people].”⁸ Human beings are naturally equal. In order to achieve equality, they must act in a way that is in accordance with nature.⁹ While viewing equality as an inherent characteristic of all human beings may seem to provide a hopeful vision for the colonists’ future, defining equality as natural causes problems in

⁶ Sidney Verba and Gary R. Orren, “The Meaning of Equality in America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 100:3 (1985), 370.

⁷ Jefferson et al., 17.

⁸ Jefferson et al., 3.

⁹ Smith, 307.

interpretation. “When decrees of a Creator are introduced into discussion of the meaning of laws which men are themselves making, there is abundant room for misunderstanding.”¹⁰ Because achieving a state of equality seems almost inevitable for any group of human beings, when the colonists begin making decisions about how the nation will be run, what laws will preserve order, and what rights and freedoms will be protected, they will have little sense of responsibility for ensuring that equality is achieved. Furthermore, people seem to have no control over the definition of equality because it is such an inevitable and natural force. Though presenting equality as natural allows the colonists to trust that equality for all will inevitably be achieved, confusion over the role the colonists and their representatives in the Continental Congress play in defining and preserving equality is not understood.

Further confusion over the definition of equality is caused by the unclear meaning of the iconic phrase that proclaims that “all men are created equal.”¹¹ At the time the Declaration was drafted, the definition of equality applied only to land-owning white males. The rest of humanity was not necessarily excluded from equality; equality had never applied to them in the first place. “At every turn of its meaning one’s mind gasps at its unclarity.”¹² The implicit understanding of the definition of equality contradicts the literal reading that “*all men* are created equal.” However, despite the confusion surrounding the interpretation of that phrase in particular, the phrase is incredibly important for the United States. “Our first pronouncement, as a united people, unanimously made by our representatives was: ‘All men are created equal.’”¹³ Though we debate rather the phrase “all men are created equal” should be interpreted with the exclusion of a majority of the population that was implicitly understood when the document was written or with a more

¹⁰ Alexander Meiklejohn, *What Does America Mean?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1935), 110.

¹¹ Jefferson et al., 3.

¹² Meiklejohn, 122.

¹³ Meiklejohn, 122.

literal and inclusive reading, the phrase is significant in that it showcases that the colonists and their representatives in the Continental Congress prioritized equality. However, it is important to acknowledge that the definition of equality—life, liberty, happiness, and safety—as presented in the Declaration of Independence is vague and is presented in a way that causes confusion and misinterpretation.

Along with defining equality for the nation, the Declaration of Independence claimed some preliminary freedoms for the colonists. Throughout the document, certain rights or duties of the colonists are mentioned. When the government begins to exert “absolute Despotism” over the people, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”¹⁴ In assuming “the separate and equal station” that allows the colonists “to alter or abolish” their system of government, the people must show “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” and provide reasons for their separation.¹⁵ Once the colonists declared themselves to be “Free and Independent States,” they claimed the “full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.”¹⁶ Though the working definition of freedom is not explicit, the language of the Declaration clearly defines certain rights and duties as components of the definition of freedom. The strong language throughout the document forcefully claims rights for the colonists.¹⁷ Such powerful diction can be seen in phrases such as “the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God *entitle* them,” “it is the *Right* of the People to alter or to abolish it,” and “it is their *right*, it is their *duty*, to throw off such Government.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Jefferson et al., 5.

¹⁵ Jefferson et al., 3-4.

¹⁶ Jefferson et al., 17.

¹⁷ Smith, 307.

¹⁸ Jefferson et al., 3-5.

Rather than making suggestions about what the colonists were capable and able to do, the authors of the Declaration express their sense of entitlement to equality and respect from Britain and their right to affect their form of government. The language of the document makes it apparent that the colonists are using the document to claim certain freedoms for themselves.

Once it has been established how freedom is being defined through forceful language, the definition of freedom and the rights that are being enumerated for the colonists can be examined. Freedom primarily seems to involve making decisions for oneself. The people are free to decide when the government has become too powerful or too despotic. The people are free to determine what new form of government would best serve their interests. The nation is free to control its own affairs and its relationships and interactions with other nations. “Freedom we know, not as a gift from without, not as an external possession, but as a quality of a man’s, a nation’s, own life.”¹⁹ Each person is considered free if they have the right to make decisions for themselves. A nation is considered free if each person is free. The basic rights and freedom claimed for the colonists in the Declaration of Independence ensure that the Revolutionary War was fought for liberty.

However, the colonists’ freedom to make decisions for themselves could not go completely unchecked. Freedom comes with the responsibility of being logical and reasonable in making decisions. The colonists did not simply declare their independence, but provided evidence to support their separation from Great Britain. “Since opinion has it that haste rarely accompanies good action, Congress wished to substantiate its prudence.”²⁰ Independence was not declared merely for “light and transient causes.” Rather, the authors of the Declaration “submitted” facts “to a candid world” by enumerating the “repeated injuries” and injustices the colonists suffered at

¹⁹ Meikeljohn, 96.

²⁰ Smith, 308.

the hand of the King.²¹ By enumerating the many injustices the colonists had experienced, the authors of the Declaration proved that they, the Continental Congress, and the colonists had thought through the decision to declare independence. The freedom of making decisions for ourselves comes with the responsibility proving to ourselves—and sometimes the world—that we have thought through our motivations.

The responsibility to use our decision-making freedom wisely and effectively implies other freedoms. The first implied freedom that follows naturally from responsibility is freedom of thought. People must be free to think critically about their actions in order to act responsibly on the basis of their rights and freedom. Furthermore, people must be free to examine, question, change, abolish, and reestablish government when necessary. The Declaration of Independence explains that life, liberty, and happiness “constitute the most obvious ends of man’s existence.” If the government interferes with the fundamental elements of people’s existence, then it “must be altered to serve these ends.”²² To determine when a government needs to be changed and how best to improve it, all citizens must have freedom of thought. People “must be free to make [their] own beliefs, to hold them, to change them, as [their] own judgment may determine.”²³ Freedom of thought is both a responsibility of the individual and the nation. “No man who fails to know his world, to master it with his mind, so far as he is capable, is living as a man should live.”²⁴ Part of life—one of the tenants of equality defined by the Declaration—is to be educated and aware of the surrounding world. “If, when he has before him the chance for clearness, coherence, understanding, accuracy, a man sinks back to dull insensitive, and slipshod lack of thought, so far

²¹ Jefferson et al., 5.

²² Smith, 307.

²³ Meiklejohn, 92.

²⁴ Meiklejohn, 94.

he fails to be a man at all.”²⁵ Failing to be as educated as possible and failing to use one’s education to the benefit of society not only diminishes the individual’s quality of life, but their quality of existing as a human being. Furthermore, when the nation and society as a whole prevent the people from becoming educated, wise, and insightful destroys “the human spirit” and “is worthy of human contempt and condemnation.”²⁶ By claiming the freedom of responsible decision making for the colonists—even when that decision is to abolish the current form of government and replace it with a better form—the Declaration requires that all people have freedom of thought. The United States of America cannot function if it, as a nation, denies the people the opportunity to become educated or if individuals refuse to exercise their freedom of thought by critically examining the world around them.

Another implied freedom in the Declaration of Independence is freedom of expression. The authors of the Declaration claimed the freedom of responsible decision making and the freedom of thought for the colonists in order for the people to actively participate in the government and in the nation. However, changes in the government or nation cannot come about from thought alone; the people must be able to express themselves without the fear of being punished for their opinions. Events and ideologies “will be more effectively dealt with, if, as men consider them, they openly discuss their agreements and differences.” Even if opinions differ, “strains will be lessened” and “compromises devised” only “if citizens have had their say and if their saying has been heard.”²⁷ The people must have the opportunity to express their opinions and thoughts and to discuss events and ideologies with others without being prosecuted or punished. For the people to use their freedom to examine, question, change, abolish, and

²⁵ Meiklejohn, 94.

²⁶ Meiklejohn, 94.

²⁷ Meiklejohn, 95.

reestablish government—freedoms the Declaration of Independence claims for the colonists—the freedom of expression is necessary. While the authors of the Declaration explicitly claimed freedom of responsible decision making for the colonists, the freedom of thought and freedom of expression logically follow as necessary freedoms for the colonists as well because the colonists would not be free to make decisions unless they were free to think critically and to discuss their ideologies and understandings with others. The Declaration of Independence claimed some of our most basic freedoms as citizens of the United States of America, which would become the foundation for the establishment of freedoms, rights, and duties of citizens throughout history.

The Declaration of Independence represents many of the American ideals we have defended and fought for throughout history. However, many minority groups have looked to the bold assertions in the Declaration of Independence and realized that the promises made have not been fulfilled by the nation. Two groups in particular—women and African Americans—have found their equality undefended and their freedoms unclaimed in the Declaration, and have fought for their equality and freedom using the structure and rhetoric of the idealistic document. By returning to one of the original statements of our American ideals, the first working definition of equality for our independent nation, and the basic freedoms we have the right to use responsibly, women and African Americans have made their case for greater equality and expansion of freedom and gauged how much progress still needs to be made before our American ideals are realized.

Women demanded equality and established basic freedom for themselves by using the language of the Declaration of Independence in their own Declaration of Sentiments. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first Woman’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York on July 19 and 20, 1848.²⁸ There were approximately three hundred women and men

²⁸ National Women’s History Museum, “The Seneca Falls Convention and the Early Suffrage Movement,” <<https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/rightsforwomen/SenecaFalls.html>>.

in attendance. The Declaration of Sentiments, drafted primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and modelled closely after the Declaration of Independence, was signed by 68 women and 32 men.²⁹ The words that defined the values of the American Revolution and built the foundation for the nation in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 were used in the Declaration of Sentiments in 1848 to alter the statements of the nation's principles and apply them to American women.

The Declaration of Sentiments reapplied the working definition of equality established in the Declaration of Independence. The women at the Woman's Convention in 1848 were dissatisfied with their lack of equality, as evidenced explicitly by the phrase in the Declaration of Independence that states that "all *men* are created equal."³⁰ In the beginning paragraphs of the Declaration of Sentiments, the authors state: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women 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." They also assert that the government should protect the "safety and happiness" of all people.³¹ With these statements, the authors draw from the previously established definition of equality, which included life, liberty, happiness, and safety. However, the Declaration of Sentiments revolutionizes the accepted definition of equality by applying it to all men and all women rather than just men.

By redefining equality, the signers of the Declaration of Sentiments challenged the previously accepted definition of equality in America. "For a nation so taken with equality, there is a striking degree of contention over the goal. Americans can agree on equality only by disagreeing on what it means."³² Though one of the values upon which the nation was founded

²⁹ National Park Service, "The First Women's Rights Convention," <<https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/the-first-womens-rights-convention.htm>>

³⁰ Jefferson et al., 4.

³¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Declaration of Sentiments* (Seneca Falls: Woman's Rights Convention, 1848), 3.

³² Verba and Orren, 387.

was equality, Americans often debated about what form equality would take and who could be considered equal. As women challenged the standard of equality that had been set in 1776, they questioned the nation's established beliefs. The "clash over equality" is "a clash over ideas, over the nature of a just society."³³ By extending the definition of freedom to include both men and women, the participants in the Woman's Rights Convention express their belief that excluding women from equality is unjust. The Declaration of Sentiments draws its definition of equality almost exactly from the words of the Declaration of Independence, the only difference being the inclusion of women. Though it merely adds a few extra words to the definition of equality, the Declaration of Sentiments called for a broader application of equality in a revolutionary way.

The Declaration of Sentiments expanded the definition of equality to include more than just life, liberty, happiness, and safety. In the same way that the authors of the Declaration of Independence enumerated the King's injuries against the colonists, the participants at the Woman's Rights Convention outline the injustices of men against women. By examining these injustices, we can understand how women hoped to expand the definition of equality politically, economically, and socially. "He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead." "He has taken from her all right to property, even to the wages she earns." "In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband...the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty."³⁴ "As to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon the false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands." "He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life."³⁵ These few

³³ Verba and Orren, 373.

³⁴ Stanton, 3.

³⁵ Stanton, 4.

examples of the injustices of men against women not only explicitly emphasize the denial of a woman's right to life, liberty, and happiness, but also her lack of political, economic, or social autonomy. In drawing attention to the injustices of not being able to live independently of men, the authors of the Declaration of Sentiments demand a definition of equality that truly gives women the right to life, liberty, happiness, and safety in the political, economic, and social spheres, independent of men.

The Declaration of Sentiments radicalized equality by calling for an expansion of equality for women in all spheres of equality. Some people argue that “the various spheres of equality should be separated to prevent any one from influencing or ‘contaminating’ any other.”³⁶ These people would believe that women were being unreasonable for demanding political, economic, and social equality at the same time, and might even argue that their fight for equality would be more effective if they focused on one sphere of equality at a time. However, “most of the real-world conflicts about equality and many of the difficulties in achieving equality in any single domain arise from the difficulty of keeping the domains of equality separate.”³⁷ Spheres of equality are too interrelated to be demanded, fought for, or defended one at a time. The participants in the Woman's Rights Convention knew that it was not enough to ask for partial equality, whether it be by definition by proclaiming that “all men and women are created equal,” or economically by stating that women should have a right to the wages they earn, or socially by asserting that women should be able to live their lives independently of their husbands. The Declaration of Sentiments demands an expansion of the definition of equality not only to include women in life, liberty, happiness, and safety, but to include women in all spheres of equality politically, economically, and socially.

³⁶ Verba and Orren, 374.

³⁷ Verba and Orren, 374.

The Declaration of Sentiments also expanded the freedoms and rights to which women were entitled. The authors of the Declaration of Sentiments opens by stating that when “it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume” a “position different from that which they have hitherto occupied,” women must “demand the equal station to which they are entitled” and lay the foundation for a form of government which will support women’s liberty. When the government fails to protect equality and freedom for all, “it is their duty to throw off such a government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”³⁸ The forceful language in these phrases shows that women are claiming the freedom to which have a *right* and to which they are *entitled*.³⁹ The powerful language in the demands of the Declaration of Sentiments claims many rights for women that were given to men when the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776.

However, some of the language in the Declaration of Sentiments implies that the participants of the Woman’s Rights Convention have allowed their freedom to be compromised in the past. Rather than demanding rights for themselves, women have followed the customs of inequality and dependence.⁴⁰ In the Declaration of Independence, the authors claim that “it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish” unjust government.⁴¹ However, in the Declaration of Sentiments, the authors claim that “it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it.”⁴² Instead of boldly asserting that women have the right to alter the government, women compromise by refusing allegiance and support for an unjust form of government. Many Americans “wanted liberty for themselves but not for others.”⁴³ Liberty for others seemed to

³⁸ Stanton, 2-3.

³⁹ Smith, 307.

⁴⁰ Smith, 307.

⁴¹ Jefferson et al., 4.

⁴² Stanton, 3.

⁴³ Russell, 14.

diminish the value of their own freedom. Furthermore, when women as a minority group demanded both more equality and more liberty, the majority were intimidated by the threat to their lifestyle and the “essential opposition” of liberty and equality.⁴⁴ “If you have liberty to the full, you cannot have equality. If you have equality to the full, you cannot have liberty. If you have more liberty, you will have less equality. If you have more equality, you will have less liberty.”⁴⁵ If women were equal to men, men would not be free to exert control over the life and liberty of their wives or treat women disrespectfully. In general, as Americans “we want as much liberty as we can get, but only so much as will be possible with the equality we want.”⁴⁶ The nation was founded on the principles of equality and freedom as outlined in the Declaration of Independence. However, a majority of Americans did not want to expand equality because they had grown comfortable with the freedom that allowed them to dehumanize minority groups. As a result, women as a minority group were forced by the majority to compromise their desire for freedom and equality to preserve the comfortable freedom of the rest of the nation. In contrast to the forceful, powerful language that boldly claims certain liberties and rights for women, mild language in the Declaration of Sentiments implies the compromises women have had to make in the past for their own freedom in favor of maintaining the established definition of liberty and balancing freedom and equality for the majority group.

Despite the compromises women have made in the past, the Declaration of Sentiments claims a revolutionary freedom for women: the right to vote. The participants of the Woman’s Rights Convention refer to “her inalienable right to the elective franchise.”⁴⁷ In asking for the right to vote, women were revolting “against human slavery. They were determined to break down

⁴⁴ Russell, vii.

⁴⁵ Russell, 14.

⁴⁶ Russell, 15.

⁴⁷ Stanton, 3.

the external customs, the habits of thinking, by which through all the ages women had been held back from sharing in many of the richest spirited experiences in the race.”⁴⁸ The right to vote would allow women to use their opinions to effect change and provide them with “an equal share in the making of public policy.”⁴⁹ While possessing the right to vote would make women more equal to men, voting would come with the responsibilities associated with certain freedoms. Voting “demands them [men and women] that they respond to the opportunities and obligations which freedom brings them, that they become such persons as they are capable of being.”⁵⁰ The right to vote and the freedom to affect public policy and the government is a duty that American citizens must use responsibly. Women not only claim this freedom as one of their own rights in the Declaration of Sentiments, but express their willingness to accept responsibly using their right to vote by committing themselves to “the final triumph of the Right and the True.”⁵¹ This pledge declares that women can discern what is right and true for themselves, their community, and their nation, and can act on their thoughts responsibly and effect change through their right to vote. By demanding the right to vote and by asserting that voting is one of the inalienable rights that would make men and women equal, the participants in the Woman’s Rights Convention use the Declaration of Sentiments to radically expand the definition of freedom and to accept the responsibility that comes with greater liberty.

The Negro Declaration of Independence, modelled on the structure of the Declaration of Independence, demands equality and claims greater freedom for African Americans. Though the Republican Party had supported the expansion of rights for African Americans through the Emancipation Proclamation and the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, African

⁴⁸ Meiklejohn, 98.

⁴⁹ Meiklejohn, 96.

⁵⁰ Meiklejohn, 98.

⁵¹ Stanton, 5.

Americans were becoming disillusioned with Republican administrations. The party was “proceeding to abandon the southern Negro to the white supremacists, granting amnesty to Confederate leaders, withdrawing Union troops from state after state, and doing little to suppress the extralegal organizations like the Ku Klux Klan that were murdering and terrorizing Negroes, depriving them of the right to vote, and forcing them to remain economically oppressed.”⁵²

Written in February 1876 by the National Independent Political Union, the Negro Declaration of Independence states that African Americans will no longer align themselves with the Republican Party, but will support the political party or candidate whose principles most support their progress.

The Negro Declaration of Independence uses the structure of the Declaration of Independence to draw attention to the lack of equality in America after the Civil War and to expand the definition of equality for African Americans. The Negro Declaration begins with the statement of their separation from the Republican Party: “We, colored men, representing nearly all the States and Territories of the United States, believing with the fathers, that the happiness of the people is the sole end of government, and taking into consideration the unhappy condition now existing...do hereby denounce [the Republican Party] as being the primary cause of all the wrongs committed against us.”⁵³ In this daring opening sentence, the authors claim American history as the history of African Americans by referring to the definition of equality established in the Declaration of Independence and applying it to the circumstances facing African Americans. The Negro Declaration further emphasizes the inequality in America by explaining that the Republican Party’s actions have caused a significant “detriment to the rights and liberties of the people.”⁵⁴ By enumerating the many injustices African Americans have suffered at the hands of the Republican

⁵² Philip S. Foner, ed., *We, the Other People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 89.

⁵³ National Independent Political Union, *Negro Declaration of Independence* (Washington, D.C.: 1876), 90-91.

⁵⁴ National Independent Political Union, 92.

Party, the authors of the Negro Declaration of Independence create a need for action and change in the form of more equality for African Americans. The Declaration of Independence presented equality as a natural state in which humans can exist. Therefore, inequality results “from the violation of the laws of Nature.”⁵⁵ This means that “men were unequal only because men themselves made them so.”⁵⁶ Because it is unnatural for people to be unequal, any inequality in society must be constructed by society. If people construct inequality, they are also capable of correcting it and creating a more equal society.⁵⁷ The Negro Declaration of Independence emphasizes the inequality that separates African Americans as a minority group from the majority, and creates a need for action to be taken to create more equality. By drawing attention to how the life, liberty, happiness, and safety of African Americans have been infringed upon, the Negro Declaration of Independence asserts that African Americans are, in fact, equal to white Americans.

After applying the working definition of equality to African Americans and demonstrating the need for society to become more equal, the authors of the Negro Declaration of Independence expand the definition of equality to include African Americans. The Negro Declaration clearly states the demands for equality: “we ask nothing but full and equal justice before the law, protection for our lives and property against lawlessness and mob violence, and equitable recognition in the several departments of the government, based upon our intelligence and integrity.”⁵⁸ In 1776, the Declaration of Independence framed equality as a natural and inevitable end which did not need legal protection. However, the members of the National Independent Political Union expanded the definition of equality to include legal protection of life, liberty, happiness, and safety along with property. Furthermore, the definition of equality for African

⁵⁵ Russell, 47.

⁵⁶ Russell, 10.

⁵⁷ Russell, 45.

⁵⁸ National Independent Political Union, 93.

Americans was expanded to include equal representation in government. The Negro Declaration of Independence asks for equality in the political, economic, and social spheres. Rather than ask for equality in some aspects of life, African Americans demanded change in all spheres of equality because of the interrelated nature of political, economic, and social issues.⁵⁹ The Negro Declaration of Independence expanded the definition of equality to include legal protection of life, liberty, happiness, and safety; equality in all aspects of life; and equal representation in the government.

The Negro Declaration of Independence expanded equality for African Americans less concretely and more conceptually as well. The Negro Declaration ends with the call for “co-operation of the colored people of the whole country” in order “to organize to the end that their ballots may subserve the peace of the country, the fraternization of all the people, and the prosperity and unification of all the sections of our undivisible Republic.”⁶⁰ This call to action clearly outlines several goals for a future with broader definitions of equality. The definition of equality is changed with the phrases “fraternization of all people,” “unification,” and “undivisible Republic.” Fraternity and indivisibility further imply companionship, brotherhood, and unity. These phrases subtly imply that not only is equality comprised of life, liberty, happiness, and safety, but unity among all people as well. By applying the definition of equality—as proposed by the familiar words of the Declaration of Independence—to African Americans, the Negro Declaration of Independence demands greater equality for African Americans.

The Negro Declaration of Independence goes on to claim specific freedoms for African Americans. African Americans exercised their freedom to make decisions for themselves by choosing to separate from the Republican Party. Instead, “we propose to stand by *principles*, and

⁵⁹ Verba and Orren, 374.

⁶⁰ National Independent Political Union, 93.

will support only those *men who will do the most for us.*⁶¹ The freedom of decision does not go unchecked, and the Negro Declaration acknowledges that increased equality and freedom will be “based upon our intelligence and integrity.”⁶² African Americans not only claim and use the freedom of thought, the freedom of expression, and the freedom to make decisions for themselves, but also the obligation, opportunity, and responsibility to use that freedom wisely.⁶³ This responsibility is further exemplified when Negro Declaration enumerates the many “usurpations and encroachments upon the liberties of the people of the South” of the “*infamously and tyrannically* administered” Republican Party.⁶⁴ Just as the founding fathers could not use their freedom of decision to declare independence without proving that their decision was valid, African Americans prove that they have suffered greatly at the hands of the Republican Party in order to responsibly exercise their freedom of decision and separate. By choosing to structure the document similarly to the Declaration of Independence and by referring back to some of the basic freedoms claimed for citizens, the Negro Declaration of Independence claims both the freedom to make decisions and the responsibility that comes with that freedom for Africans.

Though the Negro Declaration of Independence expanded the definition of freedom for black Americans, the social climate in 1876 demonstrates the delicate balance between equality and freedom. “On the whole it is the men who are seeking to enslave their fellows who to-day speak most loudly of liberty.”⁶⁵ Though the Republican Party had supported expanding freedom for African Americans, their actions following the Civil War did not always help progress liberty, and in fact, often worked to diminish the freedom African Americans possessed. By prioritizing

⁶¹ National Independent Political Union, 93.

⁶² National Independent Political Union, 93.

⁶³ Meiklejohn, 96.

⁶⁴ National Independent Political Union, 91.

⁶⁵ Meiklejohn, 18.

the freedom of white supremacists, Confederate leaders, and Ku Klux Klan members to treat African Americans disrespectfully and keep them living with inequality, the Republican Party proved that “if men are free they are not equal.”⁶⁶ Because the white majority was free in America, black Americans were not considered equal.

The language of the Negro Declaration of Independence implies some compromises that African Americans made with respect to their equality and freedom. The Negro Declaration redefines equality to include life, liberty, happiness, safety, and unity for all people. The vision for the future expressed in the Negro Declaration of Independence expresses the sentiment that “the liberty for which we care is that of a fellowship of equals and brothers.”⁶⁷ However, many people believed that “if the principle of liberty is accepted by us, then the principles of equality and fraternity must be abandoned.”⁶⁸ In 1876, the Republican Party chose to protect the liberty of the white majority rather than equality and fraternity among white and black Americans. By enduring the suffering and injustices caused by the Republican Party for so long, African Americans compromised their own equality and freedom in order to remain allied with the only political party that had every supported them.

However, as expressed in the Negro Declaration of Independence, liberty, equality, and fraternity must be taken together. “It was the liberty of equal and brothers which we established as the guiding formula of our society” in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. To consider liberty, equality, and fraternity separately is “to deny the beliefs and intentions out of which our scheme of life and of government sprang.”⁶⁹ Though the Negro Declaration of Independence represents the compromises African Americans have had to make on their own freedom in order

⁶⁶ Meiklejohn, 119.

⁶⁷ Meiklejohn, 121.

⁶⁸ Meiklejohn, 116.

⁶⁹ Meiklejohn, 117.

to appease the Republican Party and the white majority, it also redefines equality to include fraternity and unity, exemplifying that liberty, equality, and unity are essential components to the nation.

The Declaration of Independence was revolutionary when it was published in 1776 because it defined equality and freedom for our independent nation. The principles expressed in the Declaration became the foundation of our nation and of our government. However, minority groups—specifically women and African Americans—found that their equality and their freedom was not properly defined or protected in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Sentiments, signed by participants in the Woman’s Rights Convention in 1848, and the Negro Declaration of Independence, published in 1876 by the National Independent Political Union, were modelled after the structure and language of the Declaration of Independence to create broader definitions of equality and demand greater freedom for women and African Americans. Both women and African Americans have had to compromise their freedom and their demands for equality in order to preserve the freedom of the white majority. However, the claims made in both documents not only prove that women and African Americans are capable and worthy of equality and freedom, but challenge the principles upon which the nation was founded and outline a vision for the future in which both groups enjoy equality and freedom together with the majority of Americans.

The words of the Declaration of Sentiments and the Negro Declaration of Independence changed the definitions of equality and freedom for women and African Americans. The revolutionary yet exclusive words of the Declaration of Independence inspired and caused discussions about the fights for freedom and equality for both groups. While all of these documents were significant in the context of their time for the bold declarations and radical

definitions of equality and freedom they presented, we can see how they interacted with one another to reclaim history and redefine the future.

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