

Olivia Reardon
Mrs. Pautrat
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The Enlightenment Influenced The Declaration of Independence

“The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.” (Alexander Hamilton) The Age of Enlightenment began when people started to recognize that they were entitled to more than what the king dictated and stood up for these rights. A few brave people voicing the injustices of the king started completely new thinking that carried all the way to the founding of America. The Declaration of Independence is founded upon many ideals developed during the Enlightenment, some of which are that the people are called to stand against a tyrannical leader, leaders should submit to their people, and the idea of true liberty.

An idea that took precedence during the Enlightenment and then was reiterated in the Declaration of Independence is that it is the people’s duty to act against a tyrannical leader. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men ... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” and that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it” (Declaration of Independence). This idea was extremely new to the people, and thought to be crazy or desperate by many. John Maxwell wrote a

document explaining why the King is the ultimate authority, stating that “the King is the derivative of the primitive King, who is the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords...” (Maxwell 1). He ends this explanation with the statement that “a civil Enormity against the Commonwealth depose and dethrone a King” (Maxwell 2). Simply put, these two assertions state that the King is almighty and even considering opposing him is wrong. Algernon Sydney helped to dissolve these misconceptions by asking, “if disagreements happen between the king and the people, why is it a more desperate opinion to think the king should be subject to the censures of the people, than the people subject to the will of the king?” (Sydney 1). This question was a powerful one, as it put the king’s power into perspective. From this stemmed the fact that “The Law of nature [both] (in creation) permit[ed] and even demand[ed], resistance to a government that betrays the people’s consent” (Amos and Gardiner 34). Sydney proclaims that “the whole fabrick of tyranny will be much weakened, if we prove, that nations have a right to make their own laws [and] constitute their own magistrates” (Sydney 2). In order to obtain freedom justly deserved, a tyrannical leader must be thrown off.

Since a leader is appointed by the people, he should be subject to their censures. The Declaration of Independence lays out for its readers exactly what a king who is not submitting to his people looks like: “he has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good” and “deprived us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury” (Declaration of Independence). These are just a few of many grievances the king committed against the people of America. The social contract theory is the idea that the people each give up a part of their natural freedom in order to

be a part of a community where the rest of their liberty is protected. Often this freedom is preserved through the appointing of an authority, however, a tyrannical leader such as the one depicted in the Declaration of Independence, is not doing his duty to safeguard these rights. "According to Sidney, a government's legitimacy derives from the consent of the people" and this is the case because "no man cometh out of the womb with a diadem on his head or a scepter in his hand, and yet men united in a society may give crown and scepter to this man and not to that man, - then this power was in the united society" (Amos and Gardiner 34, Rutherford 1). If this is the case, that a king, or any leader, derives his power from the people, then the king should be just as much in submission to the people as the people are to him; "kings are accountable to them as to their superiors, censurable, punishable, and dethronable too" (Maxwell 1). Because a leader derives his power from the people, they are also able to censure and punish him.

The idea of true liberty greatly manifested during the Enlightenment, and became the building block for many ideas later on. It was mentioned earlier that everyone is deserving of certain rights, and the Declaration of Independence states "that among these [rights] are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Declaration of Independence). Locke discusses "ideas about ... the right of property, equality, and liberty" as does Rutherford (Amos and Gardiner 37). Before the Enlightenment, freedom, or liberty, was not something people even thought about. The king had all the power and no one questioned his authority until people started to speak out. At first, many people considered the desire for liberty to go against God's law, but really "the

liberty asserted is not a licentiousness of doing what is pleasing to everyone against the command of God” and “the felicity of man [is not] in an exemption from the laws of God, but in a most perfect conformity to them” (Sydney 1). In actuality, “those who delight in the glorious liberty of the sons of God, do not only subject themselves to him, but are the most regular observers of the just ordinances of man” (Sydney 1). When people began to realize that liberty is not a sin, more and more began to stand up for their natural rights. Liberty is a right that should never be withheld.

The Enlightenment produced many ideas that fueled the Declaration of Independence. Because people have a natural right to freedom, they are called to act against tyranny. A leader obtains their power from the people, therefore they are subject to censures of the people. True liberty is a right that should never again be alienable. If there had not been brave men willing to think and share these new ideas during the Enlightenment, the Declaration of Independence would be a drastically different document, and as a result, the United States of America would be an drastically different country.

Works Cited

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