

Lessons from the Liberty Bell Quotes

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.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed

PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION (1787)

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

THE BIBLICAL ROOTS AMERICAN LIBERTY

Thomas Kidd - Historian

Every phrase of the Declaration's opening paragraphs has been dissected by scholars—yet the claim that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with rights, has received less attention than other parts of the famous first passages of the document. It is likely that this historical neglect reflects the awareness by scholars of Jefferson's skepticism about traditional Christianity; some interpreters might believe that Jefferson was casually employing a widely recognized yet theologically neutral description of the deity and of the divine act of creation. But the motivation behind Jefferson's use of the phrase is at once simpler and more significant: When Jefferson needed a firm foundation for his plea for American rights, he turned to the broadly accepted notion of equality by creation... Jefferson recognized that the wording of the Declaration of Independence would root his case for equality in the widely assumed common creation of mankind by God—and thus provide a more transcendent basis for equality than merely referring to the rights of Englishmen or to simple reason.

John Witherspoon (1723-1794) 1 - President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and delegate to the Continental Congress. "A Proclamation for Fasting and Prayer" ratified in Congress, December 11, 1776.

"Whereas, the war in which the United States are engaged with Great Britain, has not only been prolonged, but is likely to be carried to the greatest extremity; and whereas, it becomes all public bodies, as well as private persons, to reverence the Providence of God, and look up to him as the supreme disposer of all events, and the arbiter of the fate of nations; therefore,

Resolved, That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance as assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.

The Congress do also, in the most earnest manner, recommend to all the members of the United States, and particularly the officers civil and military under them, the exercise of repentance and

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reformation; and further, require of them the strict observation of the articles of war, and particularly, that part of the said articles, which forbids profane swearing, and all immorality, of which all such officers are desired to take notice.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) American Statesman. From “A Comparison of the Conduct of Ancient Jews and Anti-federalists in the United States of America,” 1788.

I beg I may not be understood to infer, that our General Convention was divinely inspired, when it form'd the new federal Constitution. . . yet I must own I have so much faith in the general Government of the world by Providence, that I can hardly conceive a Transaction of such momentous Importance to the Welfare of Millions now existing, and to exist in the Posterity of a great Nation, should be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenc'd, guided, and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior Spirits live, and move, and have their Being.

George Washington (1732-1789) Commander of Continental Army and First President. From First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789

No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.

Elias Boudinot (1740-1821) Congressman from New Jersey. From “Oration to the Society of the Cincinnati,” July 4, 1793.

The late revolution, my respected audience, in which we this day rejoice, is big with events, that are daily unfolding themselves, and pressing in thick succession, to the astonishment of a wondering world! It has been marked with the certain characteristics of a Divine over-ruling hand, in that it was brought about and perfected against all human reasoning, and apparently against all human hope. . . . Divine Providence, throughout the government of this world, appears to have impressed many great events with the undoubted evidence of his own almighty arm. He putteth down kingdoms, and He setteth up whom He pleaseth, and it has been literally verified in us, that “no king prevaieth by the power of his own strength.”

Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833) Pastor and former Minute Man in New England. From “The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism” delivered on the 25th Anniversary of Independence Day, July 4, 1801.

Our beneficent creator has furnished us with moral and natural endowments, and they according to common sense, are our own: if so we have a right to use them in every way wherein we make no encroachments on the equal rights of our neighbor. Others can have no demand on us for what they never gave or for which we are in no sense indebted to them. Every attack of this nature ought to be opposed with the same laudable zeal and abhorrence as if it had been made on our lives. As we stand related to God, it is true we are not our own, yet he allows us this prerogative to exert all our faculties, in behalf of the general good. The laws of the commonwealth are to defend mankind in the peaceable possession of these invaluable blessings,

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which equally belong unto all men as their birthright... This is that genuine republicanism that we ought most earnestly to contend for, and is the very foundation of true independence.

John Jay (1745-1829) American Statesman and first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. From an address to the Committee of the Corporation of the City of New York, June 29, 1826.

I cannot forbear to embrace the opportunity afforded by the present occasion, to express my earnest hope, that the peace happiness & prosperity enjoyed by our beloved country, may induce those who direct her national councils to recommend a general & public return of praise & thanksgiving to Him from whose goodness these blessings descend. The most effectual means of securing the continuance of our civil & religious liberties is always to remember with reverence & gratitude the source from which they flow.

THE REPUBLICAN VISION OF AMERICAN LIBERTY

Gordon Wood - Historian

For nearly all Americans... becoming republican was the deeply felt meaning of their revolution. They knew that by overthrowing monarchy and adopting republican governments in 1776 they had done more than eliminate a king and institute an elective system of government. Republicanism gave a moral, even utopian, significance to their revolution that had made their separation from Great Britain much more than a simple colonial rebellion. They were keenly aware that by becoming members of thirteen republics they had undertaken a bold and perhaps world-shattering experiment in self-government.

Esther Reed (1746-1780) American Patriot. From a letter to her brother Dennis, who was stuck in England by deteriorating political conditions. Dated October 28, 1775.

Perhaps I have not been cautious enough in what I have written, but so it is, and if I have committed treason, it must remain. . . . My dear Dennis, the cause.. is the cause of liberty and virtue, how much soever it may be branded by the names of rebellion and treason. But I need not vindicate or explain the motives of our conduct to you. I think it must be plain to every person that thinks justly, and is unprejudiced : — but, my dear Dennis, what will be the event ? We have a powerful enemy to contend with, if they unite heartily against us, which I fear is but too likely... Everything that is dear to us is at stake... It seems now to depend on the reception of our last Petition from the Congress to the King ; if that should be so considered as to lay a foundation for negotiation, we may be again reconciled, — if not, I imagine WE shall declare FOR Independence, and exert our utmost to defend ourselves. This proposition would have alarmed almost every person on the Continent a twelvemonth ago, but now the general voice is, if the Ministry and Nation will drive us to it, we must do it, rather than submit, after so many public resolutions to the contrary... God grant us to see a happy end of these melancholy scenes, though I fear this is to be but the beginning of sorrows. Adieu, my dear Dennis, — think of us often ; re- member we are struggling for our liberties and everything that is dear to us in life.

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John Adams (1735-1826) American Statesman and second President. From a letter to Mercy Otis Warren, April 16, 1776

I know of no Researches in any of the sciences more ingenious than those which have been made after the best Forms of Government nor can there be a more agreeable Employment to a benevolent Heart. The Time is now approaching, when the Colonies, will find themselves under a Necessity, of engaging in Earnest in this great and indispensable Work. I have ever Thought it the most difficult and dangerous Part of the Business, Americans have to do, in this mighty Contest, to contrive some Method for the Colonies to glide insensibly, from under the old Government, into a peaceable and contented Submission to new ones... Such a Government is only to be supported by pure Religion, or Austere Morals. Public Virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics. There must be a possitive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power, and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty.

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814). American Patriot and Author. From “Observations on the New Constitution” 1788

Our situation is truly delicate & critical. On the one hand we are in need of a strong federal government founded on principles that will support the prosperity & union of the colonies. On the other we have struggled for liberty & made costly sacrifices at her shrine and there are still many among us who revere her name to much to relinquish (beyond a certain medium) the rights of man for the dignity of government. - Mercy Otis Warren

Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) American Statesman. From “A Letter to the American People”, August 28, 1794

If it were to be asked, What is the most sacred duty and the greatest source of security in a Republic? the answer would be, An inviolable respect for the Constitution and Laws—the first growing out of the last... Were it not that it might require too lengthy a discussion, it would not be difficult to demonstrate, that a large and well organized Republic can scarcely lose its liberty from any other cause than that of anarchy, to which a contempt of the laws is the high road. But, without entering into so wide a field, it is sufficient to present to your view a more simple and a more obvious truth, which is this—that a sacred respect for the constitutional law is the vital principle, the sustaining energy of a free government.

James Madison (1751-1836) American Statesman and Fourth President. From Federalist 51, 1788.

The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself...

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Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.

THE UNFINISHED TASK OF AMERICAN LIBERTY

Joseph Ellis - Historian.

The darkest shadow is unquestionably slavery, the failure to end it, or at least to adopt a gradual emancipation scheme that put it on the road to extinction. Virtually all the most prominent founders recognized that slavery was an embarrassing contradiction that violated all the principles the American Revolution claimed to stand for. And virtually every American historian who has studied the matter has concluded that the persistence and eventual expansion of slavery made the Civil War almost inevitable. While there is plenty of room for honest disagreement over the viability of any emancipation policy in the revolutionary era, slavery remains a permanent stain on the legacy of the founders, as most of them knew it would.

Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784). American Poet. From a letter written to Native American Presbyterian minister Samson Occum in 1774 when she was eleven years old.

Rev'd and honor'd Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights... In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward tile Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.

Elias Boudinot (1740-1821) Congressman from New Jersey, From a speech in the House of Representatives on behalf of the anti-slavery petition brought by Pennsylvania Abolition Society led by Benjamin Franklin - January 1790

But when gentlemen attempt justify unnatural traffic, and prove the lawfulness of slavery, they should advert to the genius of our Government, and the principles of the Revolution. By the declaration of Congress, in 1775, setting forth the causes and necessity of taking up arms, they say: 'If it was possible for men who exercise their reason to believe that the Divine author of our existence intended a part of the human race to hold an absolute property in, and an unbounded power over others, marked out by His infinite goodness and wisdom, as the objects of a legal domination never rightfully resistible, however severe and oppressive, the inhabitants of these colonies might at least require from the Parliament of Great Britain some evidence that this dreadful authority over them had been granted to that body.' And by the Declaration of

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Independence in 1776, Congress declare: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men 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.' This, then, is the language of America, in the day of distress.

Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) Surveyor and Inventor. From a letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 19, 1791

Sir I freely and Chearfully acknowledge, that I am of the African race... and it is under a Sense of the most profound gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of the universe, that I now confess to you, that I am not under that State of tyrannical thraldom, and inhuman captivity, to which too many of my brethren are doomed; but that I have abundantly tasted of the fruition of those blessings which proceed from that free and unequalled liberty with which you are favoured and which I hope you will willingly allow you have received from the immediate hand of that Being, from whom proceedeth every good and perfect gift.

Sir, Suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude, look back I intreat you on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed, reflect on that time in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the Conflict, and you cannot but be led to a Serious and grateful Sense of your miraculous and providential preservation; you cannot but acknowledge, that the present freedom and tranquility which you enjoy you have mercifully received, and that it is the peculiar blessing of Heaven.

This Sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a State of Slavery, and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition, it was now Sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publickly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remember 'd in all Succeeding ages. "We hold these truths to be Self evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happyness."

James Forten (1766-1842). American Sailor in the Revolution, Philadelphia businessman and abolitionist. As a young boy, James Forten stood in the crowd at the Pennsylvania State House to hear the first reading of the Declaration of Independence. From "Letters from a Man of Colour" 1813

We hold this truth to be self-evident, that GOD created all men equal, and is one of the most prominent features of the Declaration of Independence, and in that glorious fabric of collected wisdom, our noble Constitution. This idea embraces the Indian and the European, the Savage and the Saint, the Peruvian and the Laplander, the white Man and the African, and whatever measures are adopted subversive of this inestimable privilege, are in direct violation of the letter and the spirit of our constitution.