

Steps away from the Floor of the House of Representatives, where the business of Congress is debated and voted upon, is the stately and ornate Capitol Rotunda, the interior of the majestic Capitol Dome. Inside the Rotunda is a series of paintings that offer glimpses into significant moments in the rich history of a fledgling nation: the Landing of Columbus in 1492, the Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto in 1541, the Baptism of Pocahontas in 1613, the Embarkation of the Pilgrims in 1620, the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Surrender of General Burgoyne in 1777, the Surrender of Lord Cornwallis in 1781, and General George Washington Resigning His Commission in 1783. Possibly the most famous of these is John Trumbull's 12-by-18 foot-large Declaration of Independence, which depicts the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to the Second Continental Congress.

While the Congress passed a resolution of independence on July 2, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, the day we celebrate as Independence Day. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin authored the profound document that gave way to the birth of our nation. Painstaking care was given to each passage, none of which may be more memorable than this: "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." The Declaration built upon a theory of natural and universal rights and consent of the governed, and a right of redress when government was in violation of those principles. Setting forth those standards, a litany of grievances against King George followed.

The conclusion: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Fifty-six individuals signed the Declaration, though it is possible that few knew the historical significance the document would bear. Historians suggest that the list of grievances against King George was of the highest importance to the signers, but today, and since a revival of nationalism following the War of 1812, we find the greatest profundity and timelessness in the Preamble. It bears repeating: "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 ..."

When we celebrate the independence of our nation, these words inspire reflection on our personal independence as American citizens, a blessing of liberty secured through times of tumult and uncertainty. On this 234th Independence Day, let us recall the extraordinary circumstances that gave rise to our great nation, and the words of our founding documents that endure as a beacon of hope and freedom for the world.