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Rhetoric and Collective Necessity: The Declaration of Independence

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Abstract

This essay examines how the U.S. Declaration of Independence justified revolution in the midst of a volatile set of political exigencies. To engage and conciliate those colonists who held fragile or ambivalent attitudes toward the idea of independence, this short document strove to construct a narrative that vindicated mass political upheaval and laid an explanatory groundwork for the efforts to come. The Declaration is more than a starting point; it was negotiated within history at a specific juncture, and informed by the intellectual climate of the 18th century. I argue that its pivotal strategy marshals a Deist conception of Reason equated with transcendent Natural Law. The result is a rhetorically constructed narrative of resigned inevitability.

Key Words: nationhood, rhetoric, propaganda, American Revolution, Deism

Introduction

At the signing of the United States' Declaration of Independence in July 1776, the thirteen colonies had been at war with Great Britain for over a year. However, since the first shots were fired fifteen months prior, few public officials had directly advocated the merits and viability of national self-governance. It was not until the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in February 1776 (a text that sold over 100,000 copies) that the proposition became widely circulated. Five months later, the colonies declared that independence.

The idea of America was novel; no such thing as an American existed. At the time of the Declaration's publication, the colonial army was stretched in its efforts and success was not certain. While polyphonic in that it was directed also towards European governments (acquiring French military assistance required that the dispute be transfigured beyond an internal British affair), the Declaration was an effort to secure the backing of those colonists whose allegiances were not yet finalized. This was a challenging proposition: convincing colonists to sever bonds with what was, at the time, the world's most powerful empire, and for many their country of birth.

In revisiting the Declaration, one of the exceptional liberation texts of world history, I aim to address both rhetorical invention and historical context. The following examines how the document justified revolution in the midst of a volatile set of political exigencies. To engage and conciliate the broad swath of colonists who held fragile or ambivalent attitudes toward the idea of independence, this short document strove to construct a narrative that vindicated mass political upheaval and laid an explanatory groundwork for the efforts to come. Historian David Armitage argues that the Declaration's principal objective "was to express the international legal sovereignty of the United States" (21). It was targeted also to colonists whose support was tentative but essential.

The Declaration is more than a catalyst and starting point; it was negotiated within history at a specific juncture of politics, ideology, and geography. Context matters (Mercieca, 4). To set background, I first situate the work in relation to eighteenth century North Atlantic political philosophy. For social and political climate, I look also at texts by William Pitt, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, and James Varnum: texts that, read together, indicate the diverse political attitudes in circulation at the time. Each employs rhetorical tactics to advocate either engagement in combat, or diplomatic and political compromise. Each addresses the idea of an ethical war, and targets a specific audience. A thorough historical study would additionally compare the Declaration to related government texts such as the Articles of Confederation (1781) and the United States Constitution (1789). My focus is different; I concentrate on the Declaration and its significance to rhetorical theory.

This essay conceptualizes rhetoric as a pragmatic art that has a job to do in the world. As such, I explore how principal author Jefferson navigated multiple ambiguities in addressing the Declaration to its plural audiences. However, my central argument is that the Declaration strategically marshals a Deist conception of Reason equated with transcendent law and thereby achieves a narrative of resigned inevitability and collective necessity. Both formidable propaganda and poetic national touchstone, the document is orchestrated to be dignified, regretful, gentlemanly, and inescapable. I suggest that cultivating this aura of predetermination, the setting forth of one's propositions as a foregone conclusion, is a central goal of rhetorical practice and that the Declaration brilliantly embodies this strategy.

In an 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne, Ernest Renan argued that nations are a spiritual principle based on a shared history, collective project, and unifying story (42-55). One hundred years later, Benedict Anderson suggested that we think of nations as "imagined communities" constituted by shared narratives and correlated amnesias (204). More recently, Michael Bruner has argued that national identities are "malleable fictions, assembled out of available historical resources

and incessantly negotiated" through public life (3). All three insights highlight the symbolic foundations of national community. However, although I agree that national identities are flexible, complex and contested, they are also much more than that: they are durable, resilient, and not easily discarded. Robust cultures are fostered through political socialization, and their boundaries are "securely guarded, their narratives purified, their rituals carefully monitored" (Benhabib 7). Ultimately open to re-imagination, collective identities are the legacy of compelling stories. Creation of the United States of America was not inevitable, but the Declaration was an extraordinary and pivotal step towards making it appear so.

Political Context

The American Revolution was both an international war (the Americans would not likely have won without French assistance), and a civil war (throughout the revolution, loyalists constituted approximately one-quarter of the American colonies' population, and approximately 75,000 loyalists fled abroad at its end, most to the north) (Jasanoff, 6, 8). Above all, the outcome was not assured. One might profitably ask why the territories of what is now Canada did not declare independence from Great Britain either during the War of Independence or later during the War of 1812. Such was Thomas Jefferson's confidence that the British territories to the north would be easily conquered during the latter war (perhaps welcoming the U.S. 'liberation'), that he declared the conquest of the northern colonies to be "a matter of marching" (as cited in Bernstein 205). This characterization of the northern territories proved misguided. However, opposition was also prevalent in the south.

In the late eighteenth century, public sentiment in the thirteen colonies regarding self-governance was pending and openly contested. In 1769, a debate took place at Rhode Island College titled: "Whether British America can under present circumstances consistent with good policy, affect to become an independent state." This was a staged event (an initial question was set by the college; one person argued for the question, and the second person argued against). However, it also indicates the presence of substantial uncertainty regarding the idea of independence, and suggests the complex landscape wherein the Declaration was conceived. Varnum summarized a prevalent line of thought in arguing: "From England we have received our existence, and to her are we indebted for protection." Proceeding to stress a corporeal objection to the idea of independence, he warned: "Shouldst thou lift a rebellious hand, blood would run down thy streets as a stream, and death in every dreary form, would stalk through the land" (18-19).

It is worth noting that such debates were not confined to the colonies; across the Atlantic, the revolutionaries had the support of powerful individuals. Addressing England's Parliament in 1775, William Pitt gave a speech that indicates the range of viewpoints animating the political terrain at the time. Protesting the American Colonial War (as it was known), he charged the English government with ignoring the colonists' justified grievances against the Crown, transforming a minor diplomatic problem into an expensive and self-destructive foreign war, and weakening England's defences against her real enemies. Pitt asserted: "I love and honor the English troops. I know their virtues and their valor. I know they can achieve anything—except impossibilities. And I know that the conquest of English America is an impossibility" (para. 84). Such appeals went unheeded by the British government and Crown. The Declaration was thus authored in the midst of war (civil, revolutionary, and international) with the world's most powerful empire.

Rhetorical Context

Armitage writes that Jefferson crafted the Declaration "without any earlier models to guide him" (140). Following a restricted definition of genre this may be true, but the claim evades a broader context. Jefferson openly acknowledged that the Declaration drew upon both antiquity and continental thought. In an 1823 letter to James Madison he indicated that he "did not consider it part of my charge to invent new ideas" (as cited in Maier 124). Two years later, he again outlined his (recalled) motivations in creating the text. He wrote that it "Neither aim[ed] at originality of principle or sentiment," but was nonetheless "intended to be an expression of the American mind" (as cited in Howell 463). Significant here is the reference to a novel "American mind" – a collective identity distinct from the colonial relationship with England. Still more important, I believe, is the remembrance of the revolution as unavoidable. In the same letter, Jefferson declared that "forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress," the signatories aimed "to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take." This reference to a reluctant yet "forced" and "compelled" public asserts the theme of dispassionate inevitability.

Scholars have approached the Declaration from a range of perspectives. Garry Wills claims that the document may be read as three discrete genres: a political document (adopted by Congress), a philosophical treatise (as authored by Jefferson), and a symbol of nationhood (a product of later reinterpretation). With respect to the last point, Wills asserts that the Declaration created thirteen countries with little in common and that it was only in the following century that the text was imagined to have bound the heterogeneous colonial governments into a unified America. Amanda Emerson foregrounds the document's negotiated

status, a result of twin pressures emanating from “Enlightenment humanism and emerging modern nationalism” (97-98), while Jay Fliegelman emphasizes the Declaration’s performative dimensions. Arguing that it “was written to be read aloud” (4), he claims that non-aural readings offer an impoverished experience of the text.

More germane to this essay, several authors have meticulously outlined the Declaration’s intellectual roots. Wills traces this heritage to the Scottish Enlightenment, especially the works of Thomas Reid, David Hume, Adam Smith, Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, and Francis Hutcheson, and argues that as a document “Written in the lost language of the Enlightenment” (xiv), the Declaration is often misunderstood by contemporary audiences. Howell, rather, draws a parallel between the text’s argumentation patterns and popular eighteenth century structures of logic (464-465). In an exceptional study of the Declaration’s rhetorical style, Stephen Lucas situates the work in relation to eighteenth century thought and argues that “the task of rhetorical invention facing Jefferson and the Committee of Five was not to create something utterly original, but to discover in existing materials those that would best sustain America’s case for independence” (“The Rhetorical” 146). Lucas argues that the document lies squarely in the genre of earlier British and Dutch political discourse, specifically deposition apologies and revolutionary parliamentary declarations of the seventeenth century, and the 1581 Plakkaat van Verlatinge (wherein the Dutch Low Countries formally cut ties with Spain by issuing a declaration of independence) (151).

By reading the Declaration and contemporaneous documents as rhetorical artefacts, this essay builds upon Lucas’s foundational work. However, while Lucas’s method is to demonstrate the text’s artistic sophistication through microscopic analysis (down to the level of the syllable) (“Justifying” 69), my aim is to address the Declaration’s long-term rhetorical and political significance. By taking a macro perspective, I foreground the document’s mobilization of a compelling persuasive strategy: the rhetoric of resigned inevitability. That said, I fully agree with Lucas’s assertion that the document was (and is) a targeted rhetorical act (“The Rhetorical” 144). The belief that understanding and passion must both be kindled to spark action was commonplace in eighteenth century England. Indeed, “British advocates of enlightenment grudgingly accepted that while logic could inform the reason, rhetoric was necessary to rouse the will to action” (Miller, 227). A skilled narrator, Jefferson crafted a document that aligns with this worldview (Browne). Despite its affectations of impartial objectivity, the text is brilliantly composed to maximize rhetorical impact. In an earlier study, Lucas analyzes the Declaration’s rhetorical structure and illustrates how, as a concise “propaganda document” (“The Stylistic” 7) that “dignifies the Revolution as a contest of principle” (1) the text

constructs “a simple moral drama in which a patiently suffering people courageously defend their liberty against a cruel and vicious tyrant” (9). In outlining the Declaration’s argumentative form, Lucas notes that the majority of eighteenth century readers would have agreed that citizens had a right to overthrow a tyranny if all other solutions had failed. The key question in 1776 was therefore “whether the necessary conditions for revolution existed in the colonies” (3). To justify revolution, Jefferson thus launched an extended set of charges against George III. Strategically ambiguous, the majority lack specific reference to names, dates, or locations – a tactic that made the charges difficult to confute and fostered a sense of a systematic “history of repeated injuries and usurpations” (para. 2).

This essay locates the Declaration in eighteenth century North Atlantic thought. However, one must also account for the influence of classical texts. In a letter written in April 1824, Jefferson signalled his respect for such writings:

In a republican nation whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance. In this line antiquity has left us the finest models for imitation, and he who studies and imitates them most nearly will nearest approach the perfection of the art. (Cited in Wills 483-484)

One year later, Jefferson named several classical authors by name in referencing “elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc” (as cited in Howell 463). The work of Cicero, specifically, was foundational to eighteenth century continental rhetorical theory. To map the Declaration’s intellectual roots, I thus briefly trace its strategic origins in *De Oratore* wherein Cicero sets forth the significance of rhetoric and defines traits of an imagined ideal orator.

Jefferson and his co-authors may have been confident that they knew what was best for the young colonies (as an imagined political construct), but they required a compelling explanation of, and justification for, a revolutionized status quo. Cicero’s conception of rhetoric allowed for just such persuasive power. He counsels: “there is ... no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes” (I.8). Crucially, Cicero’s ideal orator works towards the *common good*; the aim of oratory, he asserts, is “to win over the audience’s sympathy, to prove what is true, and to stir their emotions to the desired action” (II.115). The parameters of *truth* and *the common good*, of course, are contested. This was definitively the case in the context of the American Revolution. “Accommodated to political exigencies” (Remer 136), Cicero’s line of thinking is Machiavellian in that (higher) ends justify (conventionally) unethical means. When Cicero declares that one must at times

speak in ways “not only wanting in discretion, but positively unseemly and disgraceful” (I.53.227), the elastic nature of rhetorical practice is clear. In Cicero’s case the higher ends and common good were tied to the Republic’s well being. Jefferson’s case was the reverse; the empire was the antagonist. His task was to reinvent the historical relationship between the colonies and Great Britain in a manner that repositioned the colonists as the seat of moral integrity and guarantor of social well-being.

Alluding to the emancipatory potential of rhetorical practice, Cicero advised that eloquence may be “so kingly, so worthy of the free, so generous, as to bring help to the suppliant, to raise up those that are cast down, to bestow security, to set free from peril, to maintain men in their civil rights” and “challenge the wicked man” (I.8.32). Jefferson and the Declaration’s signatories strove to summon (or at least channel) each of these magnificent qualities. Their strategy was grounded in the unassailable principles of “self-evident” truths: “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (para. 2). Life is universal, and as the “common aim” of all men (Aristotle I.4.1360b), so to is “happiness.” The Declaration thus presented colonists with a choice between two political orders: divinely endowed Liberty (correlated with mandatory revolution), or unnatural bondage.

Moral Duty

A fundamental rhetorical objective is to encourage audiences to believe they share an author’s motivations. In the formulation of Cicero, “love is won if you are thought to be upholding the interests of your audience” (II.51). A rhetor, in other words, must be able to follow Demosthenes’ lead in the *Third Philippic*: “If you want to hear without flattery what is in your best interests, I am ready to speak” (4). The argument proceeds: I have sound arguments, the substance of which you may dislike; others have immoral or inaccurate arguments that you may find appealing. While the course of action proposed may entail sacrifice, that sacrifice is made in defence of core shared ethical commitments. This is (raw) truth, and it is my ethical responsibility to share it with you. The Declaration’s opening sentence is structured along equivalent lines:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. (para. 1)

Reference to the revolutionaries' collective "decent respect to the opinions of mankind" enacts decorum and exemplifies appeal to ethos. The signatories' motivations are presented as both honourable and nonpartisan as they repudiate culpability for a discretionary war (this being simply one more "necessary" occasion in the long "course of human events"). Assuming fundamental "powers of the earth," the revolutionaries become as routine as a lightning storm: notable perhaps, but organic and irrepressible.

This tactical allusion to moral duty (and personal sacrifice) recurs in a 1775 speech by Henry (who led the fight against the reconciliation plan with England). Regarding war as inevitable, Henry presented resolutions for arming the Virginia militia and declared:

Should I keep back my opinions at such a time through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my Country.... For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth, to know the worst, and to provide for it (paras. 1-2).

One year later, Paine wrote a similar passage that attacks political inertia:

Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. (para. 1)

Arguing for a cessation of hostilities across the Atlantic, Pitt employed a corresponding allusion to principle: "My lords, I have submitted to you, with the freedom and truth which I think my duty, my sentiments on your present awful situation" (para. 101).

Aware of the resistance their message would face, the Declaration's authors employed an analogous line of reasoning. Constrained by the twin requirements of demonstrating both prudent respect for the colonies' ties to Great Britain, as well as a compelling justification for that relationship's dissolution, Jefferson wrote:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. (para. 2)

The latter half of this passage delicately navigates the line between custom and evolution. The central question is: how did those advocating revolution supersede social inertia? I argue that to supplant custom and tradition, the Declaration's authors marshalled the eighteenth century trope of Reason.

Reason

Crafted in an intellectual climate that celebrated balance, order, and restraint, the Declaration was a product of the Enlightenment and influenced by Deist philosophy. James Herrick has analyzed the seventeenth century debate between Deists and Christianity's defenders and summarizes a key tenet of Deist thought: "Not even the divinity is free to interrupt the rational laws governing nature.... Reason does not bow to tradition, authority, or revelation" (27). In sum, Reason equates to absolute, inviolable Natural Law.

It is worth remembering that Reason is an elaborate word, often simultaneously claimed by fierce (and doggedly rational) opponents. Six months after the signing of the Declaration, rhetorical theorist George Campbell gave a sermon in Aberdeen, Scotland where he demanded: "Have these false friends and sham patriots inflamed their minds with imaginary invasions of their rights, and with fears and jealousies for which there is no foundation" (17). Criticizing the war (rebellion)'s justification he asserted:

Nothing could vindicate this conduct but the most flagrant danger of our religion, laws, and liberties. And I will venture to affirm, and am in no hazard of being contradicted by the candid and judicious, that these great national concerns were never in less danger from the ruling powers, than in the present reign (18).

These words indicate that Jefferson's professed transcendent justifications were by no means universally accepted. Yet appeal to Natural Law constitutes the Declaration's crux.

Despite many colonists' efforts to salvage the relationship, the Declaration asserts that a threshold has been reached whereat the laws of Nature mandate revolution: "when a long train of abuses and usurpations ... evinces a design to reduce [the people] under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security" (para. 2). The phrase "evinces a design" might translate as 'the king has not in fact done anything despotic.' As Lucas asserts, many of the charges against George III were "flimsy at best" ("The Stylistic" 7). Nonetheless, assuming the worst, the Declaration's signatories self-identify as dispassionate and upright "guards for [the] future" (para. 2).

Jefferson reinforces his argument by illustrating the colonists' patience, humility and perseverance in past efforts to achieve a diplomatic solution to ongoing injuries. The passage, "In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms," echoes Henry's earlier assertion that "we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned, we have remonstrated, we have supplicated, we have prostrated ourselves before the throne." Henry here conjures a false dichotomy – a decision to be made that is "nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery." The alternative to war, he asserts, entails "lying supinely on our backs and hugging the delusive phantom of hope until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot" (para. 4). With more subdued wording the Declaration states, "Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people" (para. 30). Denoting ambivalence, the word "may" is slippery. Nevertheless, in contrast to Henry's speech, Jefferson strikes a more august sensibility in response to the perceived British failure to address the colonists' diplomatic initiatives. Had the king behaved as a monarch should under Natural Law, the social order would remain satisfactory. However the Crown has transgressed its duty, and the colonists are thus compelled to redefine the relationship. The colonists, Jefferson asserts, "have appealed to [our British brethren's] native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence" (para. 31). It is worth here recalling the words of Pitt as he addressed the English Parliament in 1775:

If I were an American, as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop was landed in my country, I never would lay down my arms— never—never—never... In a just and necessary war, to maintain the rights or honor of my country I would strip the shirt from my back to support it. But in such a war as this, unjust in its principle, impracticable in its means, and ruinous in its consequences, I would not contribute a single effort nor a single shilling. (paras. 86, 100)

In light of Pitt's petition, Jefferson's allusion to deaf English ears is at best an equivocation. However, as a rhetorical manoeuvre, this reference to an irrational and unreceptive enemy bolstered his grounds. Stressing the inescapable nature of revolution, Henry asserted, "If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged!" (para. 5). The Declaration's signatories evidently concurred. Having exhausted all alternate avenues, the colonies "must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest

of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" (para. 31). The language here is not that of hysteria, or even enthusiasm. The tone is resignation.

Transcendent Natural Law

Stating that rhetoric "does not deal with all things, but only with such as may or may not take place" (I.4.1359a), Aristotle situated the art within the realm of probability and adjudication. However, although rhetorical practice addresses a contingent world, a frequent objective is to foster a cogent sense of inescapability. I suggest that the Declaration, cloaked in the terminology of Natural Law, exemplifies this tactic. Jefferson's task was to naturalize a discretionary political decision. To do so, he constructed several major premises from which the Declaration's arguments could be derived in a fluent manner. In the resulting document, the revolutionization of (assumed tyrannical and therefore unnatural) colonial/Crown relations "is not one of interpretation but of observation" (Lucas, "The Stylistic" 1). Nodding to the current trend of empiricism, Henry asserted: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience." However, while the Declaration's line of complaints against the Crown included matters of taxation, law, political interference, corruption and aggression, the document's prime substance is its articulation (and defence) of an abstract notion of Natural Rights:

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, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (para. 2)

The unifying ideal amongst these Rights is the term "Liberty." Implicit within the text is an argument that the new government arising from the ashes of the old will honour the Declaration's stated principles. And should it fail, citizens are envisioned as empowered by Natural Law to rise again to overthrow future violations of their Rights. This idea of Natural Rights received a strong elaboration in Paine's popular treatise:

The cause of America is, in a great measure, the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of mankind are affected, and in the event of which, their affections are interested. The laying a country desolate with fire and sword, declaring war against the natural rights of all mankind, and extirpating the defenders thereof from the face of the earth, is the concern of every man. (para. 4)

“Mankind” is a circumscribed and exclusionary concept: Native peoples, white women and slaves were plainly excluded. The difficulties of clarifying the parameters of Natural Law is further demonstrated by the subsequent U.S. Civil War (initiated when the South attempted to ‘Declare Independence’), and persistent U.S. imperial ventures over the next 200 years. Yet despite its conflicted history, and notwithstanding robust loyalties to the Crown and country of birth, the narrative of Rights was and remains exceptionally powerful. Bound by Natural Law, the colonists were entreated to become “one people” (para. 1) and abandon the arbitrary and corrupt bonds that chained them to Great Britain. Here one finds the idea of America as shining city on the hill taking form. This is a heavy responsibility for a fledgling nation, but it is also (so the argument proceeds) inescapable. The revolutionary colonists’ ambitions are declared to emanate from universal human ontology; they wish simply “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them.” The envisioned political order entails a specific configuration of bounded political membership (one entailing “sharp distinctions between the all men who are created equal and others who are excluded”) (Emerson 96). Nonetheless, thus characterized, revolution is assured.

Resigned Inevitability

Enlightenment notions of restraint clash with values conventionally championed during times of war. In advocating moderation whilst promoting armed conflict, the Declaration threaded a convoluted line. This paradox echoes a broader incongruity in eighteenth century North Atlantic thought regarding tensions between an assumed natural order and human freedom, a tension whereat “equality collides with liberty” (Emerson 79). The Declaration effaces this dissonance, and it does so with rhetorical force and skill. In the above reading, I have attempted to illuminate several core features of the document’s rhetorical work. As an example of exceptional propaganda, this brief text justified war in forceful terms. In so doing, it also constituted the grounds for a novel imagined national community. My focus, however, has been how the Declaration epitomizes the rhetoric of inevitability. Dating back to Aristotle’s foundational work, rhetoric

has often been conceptualized as the art of negotiating contingencies. A contested and uncertain proposition in the 1776 colonies, the American Revolutionary War constituted a fertile context for rhetorical action. Created within this environment, the Declaration was a situated, polyphonic rhetorical gesture, targeted to both European governments and those colonists whose allegiance was unsettled. However, its core rhetorical strategy was to obfuscate its political motivations – to position itself as a dispassionate philosophical, as opposed to rhetorical, text. I suggest that the cultivation of perceived inevitability may be a fundamental aspiration of rhetorical practice; while not all appeals couch their terms in the absolute language of divinity, physics, or mathematics, all rhetorical practice aims to enact influence (broadly understood). Always grounded in ideology, rhetoric clothes itself in a manner designed to achieve a desired evaluation. Battles over reason and its grounds have constituted the heart of Western public deliberation for several centuries. By mobilizing an Enlightenment and Deist inspired abstract notion of Reason tied to universal Natural Law, the Declaration of Independence was crafted to maximize the revolutionaries' rhetorical force. The resulting document reaches into both past and future, and exemplifies the power of consummate rhetorics of resigned inevitability.

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