

Does the Declaration of Independence Still Matter?

The Declaration of Independence was partly intended as a list of grievances against a distant monarch. And both George III and the colonists who disagreed with his rule are long dead. But so are many of those who've argued that the Declaration is obsolete. In fact, this is exactly what those who called themselves "progressives" were [saying a century ago](#).

Woodrow Wilson, one of the most famous early progressives, [argued during the 1912 presidential campaign](#) that "all that Progressives ask or desire is permission...to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle," meaning that it should promote an ever-expanding set of powers for an ever-expanding government. The problem, he declared, was that pesky Declaration of Independence: "Some citizens of this country have never got beyond the Declaration of Independence," he remarked. "The Declaration of Independence did not mention the questions of our day."

But in fact the Declaration is more than a litany of complaints. [Its greater meaning](#) is as a statement of the conditions of legitimate political authority and the proper ends of government. It proclaimed that political rule would, from then on, reside in the sovereignty of the people. "If the American Revolution had produced nothing but the Declaration of Independence," wrote the great historian Samuel Eliot Morrison, "it would have been worthwhile."

The ringing phrases of the document's famous second paragraph are a powerful synthesis of American constitutional and republican government theories. All men have a right to liberty as they are by nature equal, which is to say none are inherently superior and deserve to rule or inferior and deserve to be ruled.

Because all are endowed with these rights, the rights are unalienable, which means that they cannot be given up or taken away. And because individuals equally possess these rights, governments derive their just powers from the consent of those governed. Government's purpose is to secure these fundamental rights and, although prudence tells us that governments should not be changed for trivial reasons, the people retain the right to alter or abolish government when it becomes destructive of these ends.

The Declaration also insists we have the right to "the pursuit of happiness." A higher component of that pursuit, of course, is being able to worship as we please. What right is more fundamental than religious liberty? Yet as Heritage's Sarah Torre [wrote recently](#), that right seems to be under attack.

Obamacare's anti-conscience mandate has a narrow religious exemption that applies only to formal houses of worship. Countless other religious employers, like Catholic schools, hospitals, and crisis pregnancy centers, are forced to provide coverage for the mandated services despite moral or religious objections—simply because they step outside the four walls of a church to serve others.

Insinuating that faith should remain behind closed doors, not influencing or inspiring care for others, the government's narrow view of religion has created what some have called a "[religious caste system](#)." Only those considered "religious enough" by government bureaucrats are awarded religious freedom under the mandate.

Churches across the country have been pushing back against the regulation since its promulgation. A national "Fortnight for Freedom" has been spotlighting the erosion of religious freedom and helping Americans learn how to defend their freedom. Torre notes that "the freedoms enshrined in our founding document will be hard to ignore on July 4. As the Fortnight for Freedom concludes, [church bells across the country will ring](#) simultaneously at noon (Eastern time), declaring loudly: *Let Religious Freedom Ring.*"

On Independence Day - and every day - Americans should remember and celebrate the Declaration's timeless expression of our God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and recall all those - past, present, and future - who pledge their lives, liberty, and sacred honor to upholding these truths.