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English 101

2 Nov. 2010

The Effectiveness of the Declaration of Independence

In 1776, the tyranny of King George III made it necessary for the thirteen English colonies of America to unite, declare independence and to sever political ties to Great Britain. The overtaxed, under-represented people of America needed a strong unwavering statement showing the colonists resolve to be free of British rule. The Declaration of Independence was the starting point for the United States. It served its purpose, by helping the colonists understand their own situation and by giving the British crown an understanding of why the colonists made their decision. The success of this document shows how Jefferson effectively appealed to his audience logically, ethically, and emotionally.

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was a well educated man who graduated from The College of William and Mary in 1762. Born in Virginia 1743, Jefferson went to school learning French, Greek and Latin becoming quickly fluent in all three. Jefferson studied mathematics, philosophy and law so as to become a lawyer and was admitted to the Virginia BAR in 1767. Interested in politics at a young age, Jefferson became a delegate for the Continental Congress in June 1775. A year later he was the man appointed to write the first draft of the Declaration. Jefferson was elected because of his intellectual prowess and his known skill for writing. The congress was in need of a document explaining the decision to separate from their sovereign country and why that decision was made.

In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson wrote about how when a

government becomes “destructive” and counterproductive to its people, it is the right of the people “to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government...” Jefferson wrote very passionately about egalitarianism and how all men have rights and “among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”. Thomas Jefferson recognized that these rights aren't always attainable, but when a government repeatedly ignores these rights entirely, it then becomes the right of the people “...to throw off such a government...” He then claims that the King of Great Britain has subjected the people of America to his tyranny for too long. The list of offenses against the colonists proceeds, with a focus on the King's attempts to undermine the governments of the colonies and the horrors of war that had already been afflicted on the colonists. Jefferson even addresses that for every offense against them; the colonists had tried to communicate peacefully with their oppressors but were only “answered with repeated injury.” Thomas Jefferson concludes the piece by declaring these united colonies as “free and independent states... Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown“. This powerful message to the most powerful man in Europe was what the newly formed states needed to unite under one banner and to show England that they were going to fight for their freedom. The message was so powerful that the rights of men, according to Jefferson, are still the principal rights of men in the country today [Jefferson 216-18].

The Declaration of Independence successfully appealed to the king of England and the English speaking colonies of America. By stating the firm ground on which the colonists stood, the Declaration infuriated the king at the same time as stirring up the fervor needed to make the colonists want to fight. By writing “all men are created equal...” Jefferson is directly contradicting the Church of England in where the king's power is derived from god making him more divine than his subjects. Ethically the Declaration of Independence appealed to the

colonists by giving more than eighteen examples of mistreatment by the British government against their own people. The piece refers to a “He” rather than address the king by name, giving the colonists an even further sense of separation from the monarchy most had never been a part of. The Declaration of Independence appealed and appeals to anyone who has been mistreated. Logically the Declaration of Independence becomes appealing through the concise arguments stated as facts, that the “absolute Despotism” of England is no longer beneficial to the colonists. Jefferson simply says “it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.” Because these are said in such a way it almost makes the reader feel that if they did not agree that they would either be betraying the colonists or the moral compass they should have. Jefferson uses this intentionally to build support for his other points and to bring the reader to the revolutionary point of view. [216]

Some would argue that the attempt to justify their independence was ineffective because in actuality, it was calling for war. But, this is false because Jefferson was writing to explain. He tried to get the colonists to acknowledge their mistreatment and affirm their beliefs that they were doing the right thing. Jefferson knew that the decision couldn't be made only by the elected leaders but that the public had to agree with it for separation to be successful. By stating the offensive acts against them and incorporating the condescending nature of the English monarchy the Declaration gave the colonists the ability to put into words what they felt needed to be done.

The Declaration was effective because it states that a government exists for the benefit of the people and that all men have equal rights. These two concepts have shaped United States history for centuries and will continue to do so for many years to come. The belief that all men are created equal was extremely important both during the Civil War and the African American Civil Rights Movement. Because the founding fathers of the United States created such a

statement the arguments of men who thought race played a part in man's rights were eventually rendered useless. The Civil Rights movement, being almost two hundred years from when the declaration was written, attests to its power and importance in American culture. In addition to its importance with race rights, the declaration also played a role in woman's rights. Because of the success of the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions written in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was formatted and written as a parallel to the one written by Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions was written by Stanton to promote gender equality and to shine a light on the sexism of the country at the time. Without the strength of the Declaration of Independence's writing, Stanton's piece and movement as a whole may not have been as successful which could have negatively affected modern day life. The success of the declaration of independence points to the effectiveness of Jefferson's appeals to the audience.

Thomas Jefferson's work changed the world, creating a country that has led the globe almost since it was founded in 1776. The Declaration of Independence was an effective piece of writing because of its success at appealing to its audience. The colonists of America were greatly affected when it was written and even now, more than two hundred years later this statement is still powerful.

Sources:

Cohen, Samuel, ed. *Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Second ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006. 215-19