

Good Morning, America!

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Grade 12

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Benjamin Franklin, while admiring a painting of a sunrise behind the President's chair, once remarked that the distinction between a painted rising sun and a painted setting one was not very easy to make. "I have," he said after a brief moment of consideration, "the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun."¹ It almost seemed that as the depicted sun peaked over the horizon that it was bidding our newly established country a friendly "Good morning!" Its intense and warm rays facilitated the ascent of our country out of the darkness that was oppressive rule by the hands of the British. Perhaps Franklin, in acknowledging the sunrise, was actually basking in the brilliance that is the philosophy that our country is built upon.

Take a few moments to place yourself in colonial America. The year is 1776. Hatred for King George III and his parliament is everywhere. The spirit of revolution is so thick in the air that you can almost taste it. All around you there is conversation about the current war: of the victories on the battlefield and of the losses. The rumors of the deaths of fathers, husbands, and brothers weave their way solemnly through the streets as if they are phantoms.

Now let us travel to the meeting place of the Continental Congress with our Founding Fathers. At this point, the majority of the delegates in the hot, cramped room are more than ready for a change. Five of these men— John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman²— on June 11, 1776 have been specially appointed to a committee by the Continental Congress. This committee— with Jefferson at its head— was created for the sole purpose of writing a formal declaration of independence from Britain. They work unremittingly drafting possible

resolutions. Eventually on June 28, after seventeen long days of hard work, the committee submits their final draft to the Continental Congress. It is ratified on July 4, 1776.³ Our own *Declaration of Independence* is born.

Our country, in declaring its independence, was essentially deeming the then current governmental regime as flawed. In order to assert that one system of government was wrong, however, Jefferson had to write what government *should* be. Much of what was thought at the time of how a government should behave was largely influenced by the ideas presented in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*.⁴ In this work, Locke essentially built his entire political philosophy around the belief that all humans, in a natural state, are created equal and possess certain inherent and immutable rights—"life, liberty, and property"⁵—that are independent of any variety of government. In said state of nature, the law emanates from the innate morality present in all people.⁶ This natural law is the only semblance of any sort of legal system; there is no code of laws. No constitution. There is nothing.

Locke wrote that when individuals come together and form a community, they simultaneously give up living under natural law for living under common law. This is because they desire the assurance that their rights and property will be protected. Government, according to Locke, should only exist to protect a people's rights and property. However, Locke also postulated that despite giving up their independent, "lawless" ways of life, the people are still sovereign. In other words, the government is restricted in what it can actually do in regards to ruling its citizens. If a government fails to act in this manner, then it is not only the people's right, but also their duty to overthrow said government and establish a new one in its place.⁶

Jefferson, in writing the *Declaration*, borrowed heavily from *The Second Treatise*. He too felt that *all* people, colonists and royalty alike, were "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these [being] Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".⁷ Government's primary purpose ought to be to protect these rights and not to infringe upon them. A government should "[derive its] just powers from the consent of the governed".⁸ The power of government needs to originate from the will of its people. There shouldn't exist a tyrannical monarch that taxes his people without their assent. He strongly believed that if ever a government were to trample upon these inherent rights then the people had the right to revolt.

Do those proverbial rays that Franklin marveled at all those centuries ago still shine over today's America? If you really pay attention, you can see evidence of the sunlight everywhere! Thanks to our founders adopting these ideals and using them to map out the design for this country, we now live in a nation "founded on the principle of individual freedom".⁹ We are now— as a result of the conviction that the people should rule— fortunately able to enjoy the fruits of representative government. We are privileged to vote for who our legislators will be. If a majority of the people is in favor of a certain representative, then that representative will be put in power. We are privileged to watch the progression of freedoms. The assertion that all men are created equal has resulted in the eventual demise of slavery and the emancipation of women from the cult of domesticity.

Every American should be forever grateful for this philosophy. Our Founding Fathers worked long and hard to ensure that our country would be one that was sympathetic towards the wishes and desires of its people. Thanks to their efforts, we are

able to take pleasure in the American Dream. Freedom. Liberty. And Justice. There are very few countries in this world that are illuminated by the light of the lofty ideals that are present in our *Declaration of Independence*. I am able to go to sleep easier at night knowing that Benjamin Franklin was right about that painting. The sun was rising, and it will continue to bathe America in its warmth.

Notes

- ¹"Founding Fathers Quotes." *Mark's Quotes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Dec 2010.
- ²"Declaration of Independence." *Howstuffworks*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Dec 2010.
<<http://history.howstuffworks.com/revolutionary-war/declaration-of-independence.htm>>.
- ³Kelly, Martin. "Background of the Declaration of Independence." *About*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Dec 2010.
<http://americanhistory.about.com/od/declarationofindependence/a/declaration_sg.htm>.
- ⁴Gerber, Scott D., eds. *The Declaration of Independence- Origins and Impact*. (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2002. Print.), 16.
- ⁵Locke, John. "John Locke: Second Treatise of Civil Government: Chapter 2." *Constitution Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Dec 2010.
<<http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtr02.htm>>.
- ⁶Edwards, George C., Martin P. Wattenberg, and Robert L. Lineberry. *Government in America : people, politics, and policy*. 10th ed. (Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 2002. Print.), 31-30.
- ⁷"Declaration of Independence." *Constitution Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Dec 2010.
<http://www.constitution.org/us_doi.htm>.
- ⁸"Declaration of Independence." *Constitution Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Dec 2010.
<http://www.constitution.org/us_doi.htm>.
- ⁹Tineman, Howard. *The Thirteen American Arguments : enduring debates that define and inspire our country*. (New York: Random House, 2008. Print.), 98.

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- Tineman, Howard. *The Thirteen American Arguments : enduring debates that define and inspire our country*. New York: Random House, 2008. Print.