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By Dillon Fishman

Our Declaration A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality

"We hold these truths to be self-evident." Most people immediately recognized the Declaration's preamble, or even know it by heart. But how many people know the rest of the document?

Even though it consists of just 1,337 words, few Americans have read the entire Declaration of Independence, much less studied it. In a readable and timely guide, Harvard Professor Danielle Allen lends a welcome hand. Allen's fresh reading of the text highlights freedom as she invites readers to discover new meaning in reading old words slowly. Foremost, Allen argues that political equality precedes freedom.

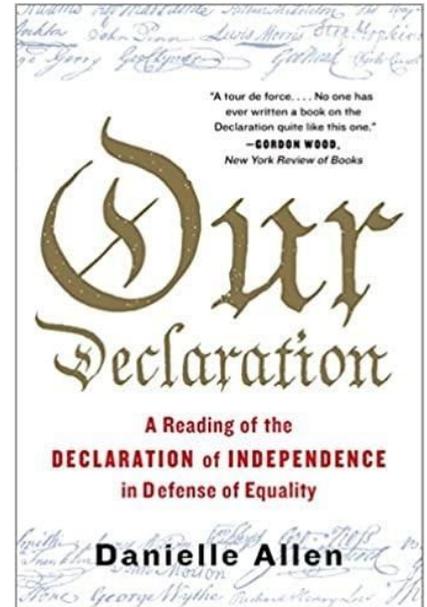
Allen, an American classicist and political scientist with earned Ph.D.s from both Harvard and Cambridge, ably guides the reader through the text and history. Among the top takeaways from the Declaration include the importance of words, equality, and unity. Words were the tools of democracy the revolutionaries used. A view of themselves as equals, not subject to hierarchy, led the signers to band together and reject monarchy. Unity of fractious factions was necessary to bring about this lasting break from tyranny.

Importantly, Allen encourages reading. For political empowerment to happen, we must "cultivate the capacity of citizens to use language effectively enough to influence the choices we make together." In fact, Allen argues that "[d]emocracies are built out of language."

Allen points out several unique aspects of the Declaration. It was a team effort. Initially, John Adams and Richard Henry Lee were instrumental. They used letters, posters, and pamphlets to obtain adoption of a pivotal resolution on May 15, 1776 in which Congress recommended that the colonies establish new governments. George Mason and Benjamin Franklin were in the mix also. Drawing on their work and that of others, Thomas Jefferson drafted the contours to codify what ultimately became the well-known document. But it was a messy and prolonged group project.

Allen emphasizes that the political process was paramount. Discussion, dialogue, and debate preceded agreement. Conversations among more than 50 leaders were critical. Declaring independence was literally a life-and-death proposition.

The Declaration presumed that readers could connect facts with principles to make reasoned judgments. The colonists effectively declared a divorce from Great Britain—and pledged a commitment to a new solidarity among the colonies. The Declaration was also designed to



galvanize public will to revolt.

Britain was powerful, a sprawling empire with a mighty military, wealth, and a longstanding legal system. The colonists had no government, no organized military, and no federal bank account. But they saw themselves as equally able to govern. And, in turn, they asserted that their state was equal to the state of Britain.

The signers articulated a divine right to freedom. Allen underscores the importance of government. Political organization, in the form of government, separates humans from animals. Properly constituted, governments exist to enable the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Fundamentally, the Declaration was about rejecting monarchy in favor of a new form of government that would enable those pursuits.

The colonists came to a common understanding that life was continuing to deteriorate. They identified 18 specific grievances, including forced military service in King George's navy. In contrast, they argued that good government must cultivate and protect the rule of law and the sovereignty of the people, encourage material prosperity and growth, and provide access to justice, security, and peace for its citizens.

Allen (who describes herself as a "mixed-race African-American woman") does not avoid the sensitive issues of slavery and racism. How could Jefferson and the other signers condemn slavery in the document and remain a slaveholder? In part, she contends, it was a conflict between habit and reason. Further, she identifies the gap between ideas and concrete scripts. With words resonant in the current era, Allen identifies zoning laws and measures that continue to promote segregation by income and ethnicity as specific topics to address.

Ultimately, Allen argues that the Declaration teaches five facets of equality. First, the signers asserted that their states were equal to other powers. Second, humans are equal in being the best judge of their own happiness. Third, they crowd-sourced to draft a list of grievances, valuing individual contributions equally. Fourth, equal agency informed the process of hashing out the means of securing freedom. Fifth, the Declaration gave an equal stake in creating a new political order.

Our Declaration is an illuminating and thought-provoking examination of a familiar document with surprisingly unfamiliar ideas and ideals. It is strongly recommended for readers of all ranks.