

# Rescuing the Declaration From Left- and Right-Wing Polemics

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Peter Berkowitz

July 20, 2025

Progressive left and postliberal right intellectuals converge in teaching scorn for America's founding principles. Attacking from different angles, both camps employ grossly flawed arguments to justify the repudiation of the U.S. Declaration of Independence's ringing affirmation 249 years ago of the [unalienable rights](#) that human beings share. Captive to the taste for the gaudy and the melodramatic nurtured by American higher education, both camps want to revalue traditional values, change the world rather than understand it, and replace history's complexities with simplistic grand narratives of good and evil. At the same time, their wild exaggerations, contrived charges, and enthusiastic followings provide an occasion to restate America's founding principles, recognize their pertinence to the enduring challenges of free and democratic self-government, and rebuild civic education around them.

[The 1619 Project](#) prominently set forth a version of the progressive left's signature opinion that systemic racism disfigures America. Published in the summer of 2019 as a special issue of The New York Times Magazine, the collection of essays undertook to correct the record about America's founding.

Led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her contribution, 1619 Project essayists argued that the United States was not truly founded in July 1776 when the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States." Rather, America came into being in 1619 when 20 enslaved Africans arrived in the fledgling British territory of Virginia.

Abolished in 1865 by the 13th Amendment, the evil institution of slavery was always a grotesque affront to the equality in unalienable rights affirmed by the Declaration. Nevertheless, according to the 1619 Project, slavery forms the deepest substratum of American existence, has touched every aspect of the United States, and remains the defining fact of the nation's life. In the 1619 Project's telling, the Declaration of Independence's self-evident truths about individual rights and the consent of the governed were always so much window-dressing designed to distract from and thereby perpetuate slavery. Yet it seems lost on 1619 Project producers, distributors, and consumers that despite the resentments and distrust that currently wrack the nation, the United States remains by most any objective measure the freest, most tolerant, and most prosperous multi-religious, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic great power in history.

Approaching matters from the opposite side of the political spectrum but with similar vehemence, “Why Liberalism Failed,” a 2017 volume by University of Notre Dame political science professor Patrick Deneen, elaborates the postliberal right’s characteristic view that freedom in America has produced a systemically corrupt and decadent society. The chief villain, according to Deneen, is John Locke. But to convict Locke of subverting Western civilization in general and America in particular, Deneen reduces the 17<sup>th</sup>-century British thinker, and indeed the entirety of the modern tradition of freedom, to a tendentious reading of a few lines from the opening pages of his 1689 classic, “The Second Treatise of Government.”

Locke’s great sin, in Deneen’s account, involves giving authoritative expression to the proposition – central to the Declaration and a cornerstone of American constitutional government – that human beings are by nature free and equal. The proper political expression of this equality in freedom, maintains Locke, consists in liberty under settled laws enacted, enforced, and adjudicated within a constitutional order to which one has consented.

Deneen, however, attributes a dark secret teaching to Locke, according to which Lockean freedom entails emancipation from the imperatives of virtue, duty, and nature’s and God’s law. For Deneen, Lockean freedom, and therefore American freedom from the beginning and in its essence, gives rise to an incoherent and inhuman demand for the chimera of absolute freedom. Deneen does not allow his polemic to be sidetracked by such core components of Locke’s thinking as his insistence on the duty to honor God’s authority, his distinction between liberty and license, and his 1693 book, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” which deals with the virtues and how parents should foster them.

In America’s universities, many students will encounter the progressive left’s and postliberal right’s vilification of America’s founding principles instead of receiving a proper introduction to the case *for* the Declaration and the Constitution. For such students and indeed for citizens whose instincts, sentiments, and experience tell them that America’s founding principles sustain the nation, Vincent Phillip Muñoz provides an excellent tonic in “[The American Revolutions of 1776](#),” which appears in the summer issue of National Affairs.

A professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame (like Deneen), Muñoz tactfully understates matters in observing that “As America’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaches, not everyone is eager to celebrate the Declaration of Independence and the political revolution it sparked.” His essay, a version of which will appear in the American Enterprise Institute’s forthcoming volume “[Religion and the American Revolution](#)” – part of AEI’s “America at 250” initiative (I contributed to an earlier [volume](#) in the series) – briskly lays out three revolutionary achievements of 1776. These achievements deserve our gratitude, warrant celebration, and suffer suppression by or exclusion from university curricula. All three champion unalienable or natural rights and the limited government that secures them.

The first revolution of 1776 affirmed that just government is grounded in the consent of the governed. Without questioning God's authority, the American view broke with the then-prevalent notion that legitimate political authority derives from divine right. And without challenging the classical premise that citizens should govern and be governed in accordance with human nature, America's founders rejected the classical idea that wisdom or moral virtue provides decisive title to rule.

America's founders held that while human beings are not equal in all respects and not free in all ways, we are born equal in rights and therefore neither masters over nor subordinate to others. Each has equal right to govern himself or herself, but no one has the right to govern another. One crucial exercise of the right to govern oneself consists in consenting to the exercise of political authority. In practice, that means that each has an obligation to obey only those laws – the disagreeable as well as the agreeable – that issue from established constitutional processes to which he or she has consented. Consent can be given expressly, as in the formal ceremonies by which immigrants officially acquire citizenship, or tacitly, as in the manner of the native-born who acquire the obligation to obey the laws through living under them and enjoying their benefits.

The second revolution of 1776 taught that government's primary purpose is to secure natural or unalienable rights. America's founders parted ways with the traditional view that government's purpose was to perfect or save souls, but the parting was not driven by indifference or hostility to higher concerns. Rather, the founders proceeded from the conviction that care of the soul was the proper responsibility of individuals, families, and religious institutions.

Securing rights did not preclude government from assuming additional responsibilities, provided that they were consistent with the equal rights of all, to advance the common good. "Unlike influential progressive thinkers such as Herbert Croly and political leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt, the founders did not hold that a fundamental purpose of government is to provide directly for the people's material needs or to ameliorate all unfortunate circumstances," Muñoz writes. "They instead understood the role of government as securing the conditions, including the economic conditions, that would allow Americans to be responsible – to employ their natural rights to provide for themselves, their families, and those under their care."

The third revolution of 1776 maintained that religious liberty, the right of individuals to worship in accordance with conscience, was an essential right. Far from expressing or implying antipathy to religion, limiting government's authority over religious belief and practice stemmed from a determination to protect faith. Prohibiting government from establishing religion or impairing its free exercise reflected the belief that true religion could not be dictated by civil law because it was grounded in conscience and choice. Another

reason to restrict political control over religion was the distinct tendency of government officials to lack competence in interpreting scripture and managing religious teaching and observance.

From the founders' perspective, moreover, the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion were not political antagonists but rather political allies. In their view, since human beings are by nature free and equal and endowed with reason, only faith practiced in accordance with conscience could be pleasing to God. And because the numerous Christian denominations at the founding affirmed that every human being is precious in God's eyes and that power must be divided between church and state, religion in America bolstered the nation's natural rights principles.

These three revolutionary achievements of 1776 – grounding just government in citizens' consent, focusing government on securing rights, and protecting religious liberty out of respect for faith – deserve to be widely heralded in next year's celebrations of the Declaration of Independence's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And study of their origins, integration into American constitutional government, and implications for today's challenges should promptly be placed at the center of civic education in America.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.*