

July 6, 1997 | An Expression of the American Mind

By RICHARD ALAN RYERSON

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*Pauline Maier cautions us against misinterpreting the significance of our most treasured national relic*

Writing of his Declaration of Independence some 49 years after it was issued by the Continental Congress, Thomas Jefferson disclaimed "aiming at originality of principle or sentiment"; his text "was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion." Nearly two centuries later, Pauline Maier, a professor of American history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a noted authority on the American Revolution, has written the first major study of the Declaration to endorse this characterization wholeheartedly. "American Scripture" immediately takes its place as the definitive statement of the Declaration of Independence as the embodiment of the American mind and historical experience, rather than as a product of Jefferson's pen or of some British philosophy of natural rights.

In making her case, Maier builds a persuasive narrative with several distinctive strengths. The first is her contention that the decision to declare independence, not the language of the Declaration, was the great achievement of 1776 -- a judgment shared by virtually every American at that time, with the possible exception of Jefferson. A second virtue is its vigorous argument that independence was, for individuals, for the several colonies and for Congress, an unavoidable necessity rather than a philosophical choice.

The most original contribution of "American Scripture," however, is Maier's setting both the congressional decision to break with Britain and the Declaration itself in the context of some 90 other "declarations" of independence issued between April and early July 1776 by Massachusetts towns; New York and Pennsylvania artisan and militia associations; counties in New York, Maryland and Virginia; South Carolina grand juries; and the provincial congresses of nine colonies. She discusses these instructions, presentments, declarations and constitutional preambles, all remarkably similar in content, at some length in her second chapter, "The 'Other' Declarations of Independence," and lists them all; she also provides several complete texts as illustrations in her appendixes. She is apparently the first historian to accord such attention to these local declarations, and in so doing, she greatly advances her argument that the Declaration of Independence was indeed "an expression of the American mind."

In a chapter called "Mr. Jefferson and His Editors," her one foray into close textual analysis, Maier shows how Jefferson was able to write the Declaration in perhaps just two days by cobbling it together from two immediate sources, his own draft preamble for the Virginia Constitution (written in May and June, but largely ignored by Virginia's lawmakers) and George Mason's preliminary draft of Virginia's Declaration of Rights, which was published in Philadelphia in mid-June. Jefferson turned his preamble into the Declaration's list of charges against George III, and transformed Mason's draft into the Declaration's celebrated passage on the right of revolution: "All men are created equal." The committee then made several minor revisions in the opening paragraphs and in certain charges against the King, but by July 2, when Congress voted for independence, Jefferson's text still needed substantial work, for which he had too little time. What he did have, in one of Maier's most perceptive remarks, was "the next best thing: an extraordinary editor." His editor, the entire Congress, spent the next two days carefully revising the draft's closing sections, removing over one-quarter of Jefferson's text and greatly improving the final result. No previous study of the Declaration so effectively reduces Jefferson from author to draftsman of the Declaration of Independence.

These three contentions -- the necessity of declaring independence, the importance of local declarations and the role of Jefferson as heavily revised draftsman -- together meet Maier's first objective, to explain "the original making of the Declaration of Independence." Her second objective, to show how the Declaration was remade into "the document most Americans know, remember and revere," is the work of her fourth chapter, entitled "American Scripture." This effective but less original narrative traces the Declaration through a period of almost total neglect (1777-89), followed by its use as a Republican weapon in partisan wars with the Federalists (1790-1815) and its rapid transformation into a sacred link, above all party strife, with the nation's rapidly vanishing heroic past (1816-26). Thereafter, it was appealed to with ever greater frequency by reformers and abolitionists and by all who sought to renew the moral foundation of American political life, culminating in its apotheosis in the Gettysburg Address.

Maier concludes her argument with the hope that a sounder understanding of the document may allow Americans to see that "the vitality of the Declaration of Independence rests . . . upon the readiness of the people and their leaders to discuss its implications . . . not in the mummified paper curiosities lying in state" at the National Archives; "in the ritual of politics, not in the worship of false gods who are at odds with our 18th-century origins and who war against our capacity, together, to define and realize right and justice in our time."

"American Scripture," by effectively arguing that our Declaration was never intended to be scripture and seriously misleads the nation when it is treated as a sacred text, offers Americans a fresh perspective on their most treasured national relic. But if this book is the strongest statement of the Declaration as the embodiment of the American mind, it is not the definitive history. The very originality of Maier's work demonstrates that neither "American Scripture" nor Carl Becker's classic book "The Declaration of Independence: A

Study in the History of Political Ideas" (1922) can claim this distinction. America's brief Declaration has too many dimensions -- its origins (historical and philosophical), its making (in Philadelphia and in myriad localities) and its legacy (both domestic and international) -- to be captured by any one approach.

CONSIDER the matter of the Declaration's sources. Maier observes that she has written the book (about the Declaration's popular and pragmatic origins) that Carl Becker chose not to write but later admitted he profitably could have written. In making this choice, however, she ignores what Becker sought to explain: the Declaration as a classic document of the Age of Enlightenment, a conscious product of the natural rights philosophy of John Locke and other British thinkers, and a text that spoke powerfully to an international audience.

Maier instead presents an America that had no choice but to declare independence and form republican governments. In creating their republics, Americans encountered neither questions nor controversy about the details of the novel political structures under which they might have to live for the rest of their lives. Such concerns are absent from her text, and even her full and informative source notes, which give generous credit to a host of local studies of political mobilization, pay no attention to the vast literature on republican theory and practice or on political economy that has appeared in the last three decades. Not Gordon Wood, nor J. G. A. Pocock, nor Joyce Appleby, casts the palest shadow over Maier's unclouded scene.

The text of the Declaration, too, is given the simplest of genealogies. Behind both Jefferson's and George Mason's efforts lies a single document, England's Declaration of Rights of 1689, a source that looms so large that Maier should have included it in her appendixes. But her account of the earlier Declaration's parentage and birth is confused and obscure. She ignores England's civil war and its 17th-century Commonwealthmen, pays scant attention to John Locke and fails to mention an immediate cause of the Declaration's relative conservatism: in formally deposing the absconding King James II in favor of William and Mary in 1689, the English were simply replacing an unsatisfactory monarch with his more amenable son-in-law and daughter. She notes key differences between early drafts and the final statutory form of England's Declaration, but seems uncomfortable whenever a more radical, "Lockean" early draft is preferred by 18th-century readers, whether English (Sir William Blackstone) or American (William Henry Drayton). One has the sense that Maier believes neither the English nor the Americans, whether leaders or ordinary people, should have needed or wanted political thinkers of any stripe to assist them in understanding their complex world.

Carl Becker, of course, felt differently. If his book creates a world largely without events (a just observation), "American Scripture" comes close to creating a world without ideas. Those who seek to understand Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, to name just two figures of some relevance to the Declaration of Independence, may reasonably object that whether or not one thinks they should have cared about formal political thought, they in fact did care. My own belief is that many other Americans -- Continental and provincial congressmen, Southern grand jurors, Virginia county leaders, Philadelphia and New York militiamen and artisans, and New England town meeting members -- also cared. Indeed, they had to, because their task was not simply to escape from the British Empire, but to create a new political world, and this had to be done at every level.

Maier's closing exhortation to Americans to turn away from the "sacred text" created by 19th-century mythologizers to embrace the real Declaration of 1776 must strongly appeal to historians of 18th-century America. But two nagging questions intrude. First, was it not the "sacred text" that so appealed to Abraham Lincoln, and to so many antebellum reformers, with such dramatic and beneficial effects for America? Second, is there not some irony in asking Americans to apprehend a Declaration that will call them to face bravely the divisive issues of our day, after presenting an American Revolution in which there appears to have been so little internal division on any question? If we are to recover the lost world of 1776, let us try to recover all of it.

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