

The Editing of the Declaration of Independence:

Better or Worse?

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### Better or Worse?

<sup>11</sup> The Declaration of Independence is so widely regarded as a statement of American ideals that its origins in practical politics tend to be forgotten. The document drafted by Thomas Jefferson was intensely debated in the Continental Congress and then substantially revised before being signed. Since then, most historians have agreed that Jefferson's Declaration was improved in the process. But Jefferson himself was disappointed with the result (Boyd 37), and recently his view has received scholarly support. Thus it is an open question whether the Congress improved a flawed document or damaged an inspired one. An answer to the question requires understanding the context in which the Declaration was conceived and examining the document itself.

<sup>12</sup> The Continental Congress in 1776 was attended by representatives of all thirteen colonies. The colonies were ruled more or less separately by Great Britain and had suffered repeated abuses at the hands of King George III, the British Parliament, and local appointed governors. To end the abuses of the British, many colonists were urging three actions: forming a united front, seceding from Britain, and taking control of their own international trade and diplomacy (Wills 325-26). They saw the three actions as dependent on each other, and all three were spelled out in a resolution that was proposed in the Congress on June 7, 1776 (326-27).

<sup>13</sup> The Congress named a five-man committee to prepare a defense of this resolution in order to win the support of reluctant colonists and also to justify secession to potential foreign allies (Malone 219; Wills 330-31). Jefferson, the best writer on the committee, was assigned to draft the document. The other committee members made a few minor changes in his draft before submitting it to the Congress. The Congress made many small and some quite large alterations before approving the document on July 4 (Becker 171).

<sup>14</sup> The most interesting major change, because of the controversy it ultimately generated, was made in Jefferson's next-to-last paragraph. (See fig. 1 for Jefferson's version with the Congress's editing.) Jefferson made several points in the paragraph: the colonists had freely submitted to the British king but not to the British Parliament; they had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to gain the support of the British people for their cause; yet the British ("unfeeling brethren") had not only ignored the colonists' pleas but also worsened their difficulties by supporting the Parliament. These actions, Jefferson concluded,

gave the colonists no choice but to separate from England. The Congress cut Jefferson's paragraph by almost two-thirds, leaving only the points about the colonists' appeals to the British, the refusal of the British to listen, and the need for separation.

<sup>15</sup> Until recently, most historians accepted all the Congress's changes in the Declaration as clear improvements. Dumas Malone, author of the most respected biography of Jefferson, expresses "little doubt that the critics strengthened" the Declaration, "primarily by deletion" (222). Julian Boyd, a historian of the period and the editor of Jefferson's papers, observes that "it is difficult to point out a passage in the Declaration, great as it was, that was not improved by their [the delegates'] attention" (36). Carl Becker, considered an expert on the evolution of the Declaration, agrees that "Congress left the Declaration better than it found it" (209). These scholars make few specific comments about the next-to-last paragraph. Becker, however, does say that Jefferson's emphasis on the British Parliament is an allusion to a theory of government that is assumed in the rest of the document, so that the paragraph "leaves one with the feeling that the author, not quite aware that he is done, is beginning over again" (211-12).

<sup>16</sup> The agreement in favor of the Congress's changes was broken in 1978 when the journalist and humanities scholar Garry Wills published a detailed defense of Jefferson's original, particularly his next-to-last paragraph. According to Wills, "Jefferson's Declaration of Independence is a renunciation of unfeeling brethren. His whole document was shaped to make that clear" (319). The British people had betrayed the colonists both politically (by supporting the intrusive Parliament) and emotionally (by ignoring the colonists' appeals), and that dual betrayal was central to Jefferson's argument for secession (303). Wills contends that in drastically cutting the next-to-last paragraph, "Congress removed the heart of his argument, at its climax"(319).

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. we have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend <sup>^ [a]</sup> jurisdiction over <sup>^</sup> *[these our states.]* we have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration & settlement here, *[no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expence of our own blood & treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league & amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: and,]* we <sup>^</sup> appealed to their native justice and magnanimity <sup>^ [as well as to]</sup> the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations <sup>^</sup> *which* <sup>^ [were likely to]</sup> interrupt our connection and correspondence. they too have been deaf to the voice of justice & of consanguinity, *[and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, re-established them in power at this very time too they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only souldiers of our common blood, but Scotch & foreign mercenaries to invade & destroy us. these facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. we must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind enemies in war, in peace friends. we might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity. be it so, since they will have it. the road to happiness & to glory is open to us too. we will tread it apart from them, and]* <sup>^</sup> acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our *[eternal]* separation <sup>^</sup>!

an unwarrantable  
us.  
have  
and we have  
conjured them by  
would inevitably  
we must therefore  
and hold them as we  
hold the rest of mankind  
enemies in war,  
in peace friends.




Fig. 1. Next-to-last paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, from Jefferson (318-19). The text is Jefferson's as submitted by the five-man committee to the Continental Congress. The Congress deleted the passages that are in italics and added the passages in the margin.

<sup>¶7</sup> As an explanation of Jefferson's intentions, Will's presentation is convincing. However, a close examination of the original and edited versions of the next-to-last paragraph supports the opinions of earlier historians rather than Wills's argument that the Declaration was damaged by the Congress. The paragraph may have expressed Jefferson's intentions, but it was neither successful in its tone nor appropriate for the purposes of the Congress as a whole.

<sup>¶8</sup> Part of Jefferson's assignment "was to impart the proper tone and spirit" to the Declaration (Malone 221). He did this throughout most of the document by expressing strong feelings in a solemn and reasonable manner. But in the next-to-last paragraph Jefferson's tone is sometimes overheated, as in the phrases "invade & destroy us," "last stab to agonizing affection," and "road to happiness & to glory." At other times Jefferson sounds as if he is pouting, as in "we must endeavor to forget our former love for them" and "a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity." Wills comments that critics have viewed this paragraph as resembling "the recollections of a jilted] over" (313). Wills himself does not agree with this interpretation of the tone, but it seems accurate. All the quoted passages were deleted by the Congress.

<sup>¶9</sup> More important than the problem in tone is the paragraph's inappropriateness for the purposes of the Declaration as the Congress saw them. Specifically, the paragraph probably would not have convinced reluctant colonists and potential foreign allies of the justice and logical necessity of secession. The Congress needed the support of as many colonists as possible, but many colonists still felt strong ties to their friends and relatives in England (Becker 127-28; Boyd 31-32). They would probably have been unhappy with phrases such as "renounce forever" and "eternal separation" that threatened a permanent break in those ties. The Congress deleted those phrases, and it also gave greater stress to Jefferson's one hint of a possible reconciliation with the British: "We must . . . hold them as we hold the rest of mankind enemies in war, in peace friends." This thought was moved by the Congress from inside the paragraph to the very end, where it strikes a final note of hope.

<sup>¶10</sup> The Congress also strengthened the appeal of the Declaration to potential allies, who would have needed assurance that the colonists were acting reasonably and cautiously. Both Jefferson's and the Congress's versions note that the colonists often "warned" and "reminded" the British and "appealed to their native justice & magnanimity," but that the British were "deaf to the voice of justice & of consanguinity" and left the colonists no choice besides "separation." However, Jefferson buried these statements in lengthy charges against the British, while the Congress

stripped away the charges to emphasize the colonists' patience in exploring all avenues of redress and their reluctance in seceding. Instead of "beginning over again" as Becker says Jefferson's version seems to do, the revised paragraph clearly provides the final rational justification for the action of the colonists. At the same time, it keeps enough of Jefferson's original to remind the audience that the colonists are feeling people, motivated by their hearts as well as by their minds. They do not secede enthusiastically but "acquiesce in the necessity" of separation.

<sup>11</sup> Though the Declaration has come to be a statement of this nation's political philosophy, that was not its purpose in 1776. Jefferson's intentions had to bow to the goals of the Congress as a whole to forge unity among the colonies and to win the support of foreign nations. As Boyd observes, the Declaration of Independence "was the result not just of Jefferson's lonely struggle for the right phrase and the telling point, but also of the focusing of many minds—among them the best that America ever produced" (38).



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