

John Quincy Adams Oration – July 4 1837

In his oration, Adams first chronicled what led up to the Declaration of Independence and expounded on the subsequent development of American government, including the Articles of Confederation and then the Constitution. He reminded Americans of fundamental principles: of how liberty was a gift from God and therefore why the Founders intended for slavery eventually to be abolished; and of how union was a first principle and therefore why secession and disunion were abhorrent to the Founders and should be repugnant to every generation. Adams' oration is an inspiring look at the reason that the Fourth of July had become such a celebrated day in America—a day on which we looked into our past history, and also a day when we looked at our present responsibilities and renewed our pledge to preserve the trust that had been given us by God and by our Founders.¹

“Say ye not, “At Confederacy,” to all them to whom this people shall say “A Confederacy”; neither fear ye their fear nor be afraid.” ISAIAH 8:12

Why is it, friends and fellow citizens, that you are here assembled? Why is it that entering upon the sixty-second year of our national existence, you have honored with an invitation to address you from this place a fellow citizen of a former age,¹ bearing in the records of his memory the warm and vivid affections which attached him—at the distance of a full half century—to your town and to your forefathers, then the cherished associates of his youthful days? Why is it that next to the birthday of the Savior of the world, your most joyous and most venerated festival returns on this day? And why is it that among the swarming myriads [countless numbers] of our population [that] thousands and tens of thousands among us (abstaining under the dictate of religious principle—from the commemoration of that birthday of Him Who *brought life and immortality to light* [2 TIMOTHY 1:10])² yet unite with all their brethren of this community year after year in celebrating this, the birthday of the nation?

¹ David Barton, *Celebrate Liberty! Famous Patriotic Speeches & Sermons*, 190 (Aledo, TX: WallBuildersPress, 2003).

¹ Adams—who had played an active role during the American Revolution—was now speaking at a celebration six decades later, thus making him “a fellow citizen of a *former* age.”

² It seems unimaginable today that “tens of thousands” in the then extremely religious New England region would abstain “under the dictate of religious principle” from celebrating Christmas (which today has become such a prominent religious holiday), yet such was the case. Why? Because the Pilgrims and Puritans of New England found no Biblical precedent for a public celebration of that day (recall that the goal of these groups was to simplify religious worship and to cut away all religious rituals and celebrations not specifically cited in the Bible); nothing in the Bible established any date for the birth of Christ; the holiday was instead established by Roman tradition, thus making it—in their view—one of the many “pagan” holidays that had been inculcated into the corrupt church that had persecuted them, and which they and other religious leaders wished to reform. Consequently, Christmas in New England remained a regular working day. In fact, Massachusetts passed an anti-Christmas law in 1659 declaring: “Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas, or the like, either by forbearing [ceasing from] labor, feasting, or any other way upon such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country.” The law was repealed in 1681, but the holiday still was not celebrated by religious non-conformists or dissenters (i.e., the Puritans and Pilgrims); it usually was celebrated only by a few Anglicans (later Episcopalians), Catholics, and other more formal or high-church-tradition New England families. It was not until the 1830s and 1840s (at the time of this oration) that Christmas celebrations were just beginning to be accepted in New England (primarily due to the influence of large-scale Christmas celebrations in cities such as New York)—although as late as 1870 in Boston public schools, a

Is it not that in the chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birthday of the Savior?—that it forms a leading event in the progress of the gospel dispensation? Is it not that the Declaration of Independence first organized the social compact on the foundation of the Redeemer’s mission upon earth?—that it laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity and gave to the world the first irrevocable [absolute] pledge of the fulfillment of the prophecies announced directly from Heaven at the birth of the Savior and predicted by the greatest of the Hebrew prophets six hundred years before?

Cast your eyes backwards upon the progress of time sixty-one years from this day, and in the midst of the horrors and desolations of civil war [the American Revolution] you behold an assembly of planters, shopkeepers, and lawyers—the representatives of the people of thirteen English colonies in North America—sitting in the city of Philadelphia. These fifty-five men on that day unanimously adopt and publish to the world a state paper under the simple title of “A Declaration.”³

The object of this Declaration was twofold.

student missing school on Christmas Day could be punished or expelled. By the 1880s, however, Christmas celebrations had finally become as accepted in New England as they were in other parts of the country.

³ To many today who know that there were fifty-six who signed the Declaration of Independence, JQA’s reference to fifty-five seems an error; yet it is not. Actually, both fifty-five **and** fifty-six are correct.

The Declaration of Independence was approved in principle on July 2nd, 1776, and then approved by the full vote of Congress on July 4th, 1776. At that time, the Declaration was signed only by John Hancock (President of Congress) and Charles Thomson (Secretary of Congress). On July 19th, Congress agreed to prepare a beautifully engrossed copy of the Declaration to be signed by all the members. On August 2nd, the proposed Declaration was signed in a formal ceremony by fifty delegates of Congress. Among the signers were several who originally had not been in Congress on July 4th to vote for the Declaration (e.g., Benjamin Rush and James Smith); conversely, many who had voted for the Declaration on July 4th were not there to sign it on August 2nd (e.g., Robert Livingston and George Clinton). This was because several States had changed their delegates to the Congress between the vote on July 4th and the signing on August 2nd (e.g., George Clinton was called home to lead military forces in New York, while Benjamin Rush had been sent by Pennsylvania to replace a delegate who had voted against the Declaration on July 4th). On January 18th, 1777, Congress authorized the printing and public distribution of the signed Declaration. In the time between August 2nd when the fifty delegates had first signed and January 18th when the Declaration was authorized for printing, five more had signed: Matthew Thornton (NH), George Wythe (VA), Oliver Wolcott (CT), Richard Henry Lee (VA), and Elbridge Gerry (MA). Therefore, at the time of the congressional order to print the Declaration, fifty-five delegates had signed. Thomas McKean became the fifty-sixth to sign the Declaration—doing so nearly a year after the January 18th order to print and distribute the Declaration. (Although McKean had voted for the Declaration on July 4th, 1776, he did not sign until after January, 1778.) Therefore, at the time that Congress first printed and distributed the Declaration, it had only fifty-five signatures on the document; but within a year it had risen to fifty-six—the number at which it stands today.

First, to proclaim the people of the thirteen united colonies One People; and in their name and by their authority, *to dissolve the political bands which had connected them with another people—that is, the people of Great Britain.*⁴

Secondly, *to assume—in the name of this One People of the thirteen united Colonies—among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature, and of Nature’s God entitled them.*

With regard to the first of these purposes, the Declaration alleges *a decent respect to the opinions of mankind* as requiring that the one People separating themselves from another *should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.* The specification of these causes and the conclusion resulting from them constitute the whole paper. The Declaration was a manifesto issued from *a decent respect of the opinions of mankind* to justify the people of the North American Union for their voluntary separation from the people of Great Britain by alleging the causes which rendered this separation necessary....

For the second object of the Declaration (the *assumption among the powers of the earth of the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitled them*), no reason was assigned—no justification was deemed necessary....

Six years of war—cruel, unrelenting, merciless war—war at once civil and foreign—were waged, testing the firmness and fortitude of the One People in the inflexible adherence to that separation from the other which their representatives in Congress had proclaimed. By the signature of the preliminary Articles of Peace on the 30th of November 1782, their warfare was accomplished and the Spirit of the Lord—with a voice reaching to the latest of future ages—might have exclaimed (like the sublime prophet of Israel), *Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God (ISAIAH 40:1)*....

George the Third believed that the Parliament of Great Britain had the right to enact laws for the government of the people of the British Colonies in all cases. An immense majority of the people of the British Islands believed the same.... Here was a conflict between two first principles of government resulting from a defect in the British Constitution: the principle that sovereign power in human government is in its nature unlimited; and the principle that property can lawfully be taxed only with the consent of its owner. Now these two principles carried out into practice are utterly irreconcilable with each other.... [T]he King and Parliament [and t]he people of Great Britain appealed for the right to tax the Colonies to the unlimited and illimitable sovereignty of the Parliament, (and) [t]he Colonists appealed to the natural right of property and the articles of the Great Charter.⁵ The collision in the application of these two principles was the primitive [root] cause of the severance of the North American Colonies from the British Empire.

⁴ The italicized lines in this part of the oration indicate direct quotes from the Declaration of Independence (unless otherwise identified).

⁵ The Great Charter is the Magna Charta, enacted in 1215 AD by Englishmen demanding protection from the arbitrary actions of King John against their persons and property. The Magna Charta was the first step in limiting governmental authority and granting rights to citizens—it was, in essence, the world’s first Bill of Rights.

The grievances alleged in the Declaration of Independence⁶ were ... causes amply sufficient to justify before God and man the separation itself; and that resolution—to the support of which the fifty-five representatives of the one people of the United Colonies *pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor*⁷—after passing through the fiery ordeal of a six years war, was sanctioned by the God of Battles and by the unqualified acknowledgment of the defeated adversary [Great Britain]....

The members of the Congress who signed their names to the Declaration style [call] themselves *the representatives* not of the separate colonies but *of the United States of America in Congress assembled*. No one colony is named in the Declaration—nor is there anything on its face indicating from which of the colonies any one of the signers was delegated.

They proclaim the separation of One People from another. They affirm *the right of the people to institute, alter, and abolish their government*; and their final language is, *we do, in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States....* And by this paper, this One People did notify the world of mankind that they thereby did *assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitled them*.

This was indeed a great and solemn event. The sublimest of the prophets of antiquity—with the voice of inspiration—had exclaimed, *Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once?* [ISAIAH 66:8]. In the two thousand-five-hundred years that had elapsed since the days of that prophecy, no such event had occurred.... [But with America] the earth was made to bring forth in one day! A nation was born at once!

Well indeed may such a day be commemorated by such a nation from year to year! But whether as a day of festivity and joy, or of humiliation and mourning—that, fellow-citizens—that, in the various turns of chance below—depends not upon the event itself but upon its consequences.... [A]s early as the age of Solomon, that wisest of men told the people of Jerusalem that *as a good name was better than precious ointment, so the day of death was better than the day of one's birth* (ECCLESIASTES 7:1).

Are you then assembled here, my brethren—children of those who declared your national independence—in sorrow, or in joy? In gratitude for blessings enjoyed, or in affliction for blessings lost? In exultation at the energies of your fathers, or in shame and confusion of face at your own degeneracy [slippage] from their virtues? Forgive the apparent rudeness of these inquiries—they are not addressed to you under the influence of a doubt what your answer to them will be. You are not here to unite in echoes of mutual [con]gratulation for the separation of your forefathers from their kindred freemen of the British Islands [the American Revolution]. You are [here].... to turn your final reflections inward upon yourselves and to say, “These are the glories of a generation passed away; what are the duties which they devolve upon us?”

⁶ The Declaration listed 27 grievances against Great Britain, including the abuse of representative powers (11 clauses), the abuse of military powers (seven clauses), the abuse of judicial powers (four clauses), and one clause each about Britain fostering domestic instability, opposing immigration, increasing government size and intrusiveness, interfering with foreign trade, and imposing taxation without representation.

⁷ See previous note three pages earlier on why JQA cites 55 rather than 56 signers.

The Declaration of Independence ... explicitly unfolded the principles.... [and] the exposition of these principles will furnish the solution to the question of the purpose for which you are here assembled.

In recurring to those principles, let us remark:

First, that the people of the thirteen Colonies announced themselves to the world—and solemnly bound themselves with an appeal to God—to be One People. And this One People, by their Representatives, declared the United Colonies free and independent States.

Secondly, they declared the People—and not the States—to be the only legitimate source of power; and that to the People alone belonged the right to institute, to alter, to abolish, and to reinstitute government. And hence it follows that as the people of the separate Colonies or States formed only parts of the One People assuming their station among the powers of the earth, so the people of no one State could separate from the rest but by a revolution similar to that by which the whole people had separated themselves from the people of the British Islands—nor without the violation of that solemn covenant by which they bound themselves to support and maintain the United Colonies as free and independent States.

An error of the most dangerous character—more than once threatening the dissolution by violence of the Union itself—has occasionally found countenance and encouragement in several of the States by an inference not only unwarranted by the language and import of the Declaration but subversive of its fundamental principles.⁸ This inference is that because by this paper the United Colonies were declared free and independent States, therefore each of the States separately was free, independent, and sovereign....

The origin of this error was of a very early date after the Declaration of Independence; and the infusion of its spirit into the Articles of Confederation—first formed for the government of the Union—was the seed of dissolution sown in the soil of that compact which palsied [enfeebled] all its energies from the day of its birth and exhibited it to the world only as a monument of impotence and imbecility.⁹

⁸ There had occasionally been times when States or movements wrongly invoked the principles of the Declaration as a justification for weakening or dissolving the Union, such as in the Whiskey Rebellion (1794), the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions (1798, 1799), the Hartford Convention (1814), and the South Carolina Nullification Convention (1832). In each case, the group—or State—threatened to declare its own independence from the United States, or unilaterally—as a single State—to declare national acts unlawful. It was this perversion of the principles of the Declaration that eventually was invoked by the South to justify its secession from the Union in order to form its own separate nation, thus precipitating the War Between the States.

⁹ It became clear during the American Revolution that some type of national government was needed; the war could not be effectively conducted through thirteen separate State governments. Consequently, in June, 1776, Congress appointed a Committee of thirteen delegates—one from each State—to work out some agreement under which they could operate jointly while still maintaining their individual State sovereignty. Those on the Committee were a distinguished group, most of whom would eventually sign the Declaration of Independence and some of whom would later sign the US Constitution. This Committee constructed what became known as the Articles of Confederation, approved by Congress on November 15, 1777, but not ratified by the States until three-and-a-half years later on March 1, 1781.

The reason for this delay primarily lay in resolving questions surrounding the future ownership principally of the Ohio territory then claimed by Virginia. Each State had long-standing and universally acknowledged claims on territories that were within its State jurisdiction. For example, New York held the lands that in 1792 became Vermont; North Carolina held the lands that in 1796 became Tennessee; Delaware was part of Pennsylvania until 1776; Kentucky was

The Declaration did not proclaim the separate States free and independent, much less did it announce them as sovereign States or affirm that they separately possessed the war-making or the peace-making power. The fact was directly the reverse.

The Declaration was that the United Colonies, forming One People, were *free and independent States—that they were absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown—that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain was and ought to be totally dissolved—and that as free and independent States, they had full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and do all other acts and things which independent States may of right do*. But all this was affirmed and declared not of the separate, but of the United, States....

In constituting themselves One People, it could not possibly be their intention to leave the power of concluding peace to each of the States of which the Union was composed. The war was waged against all. The war itself had united the inhabitants of the thirteen Colonies into One People. The lyre of Orpheus was the standard of the Union.¹⁰ By the representatives of that One People and by them alone could the peace be

part of Virginia until 1785; Maine was part of Massachusetts until 1820; etc. The Ohio territory (claimed by Virginia) was a massive area stretching from the Great Lakes in the north, along the length of the Mississippi River, and all the way to the “South Sea” (the Gulf of Mexico). Many of the other States wanted parts of this territory; however, Virginia ceded her rights to the Ohio Territory with the stipulation that the land would be used for the common good of the new nation rather than for any particular State. In short, several States had been reticent to approve a national government until the disposition of that (and other) territory had been settled.

Under the Articles of Confederation, a national Congress was established, but each State had equal power with all others without regard to representation. Additionally, agreement was not by the majority but rather by two-thirds of the States, thereby giving power to a block of any five States to thwart the will of the other eight. Furthermore, under the national government there was no judiciary and no “head” or executive and therefore no way to enforce the laws.

The weakness of this system—weaknesses incorporated because of the ardent State jealousies that caused the scope of powers of the national government to be over-restricted—soon became apparent to all. Congress had conducted its business throughout most of the Revolution (until the Articles of Confederation were officially ratified late in the war) on the majority vote principle. Had Congress been required to operate under the Articles of Confederation during the Revolution, it would have been completely powerless and ineffective—a fact that was made clear in the few years in which the nation did flounder under the Articles.

Further fueling discontent with the Articles was the fact that they actually protected and encouraged inequality rather than justice among the States. For example, States that had contributed the most during the Revolution (e.g., Connecticut and Massachusetts) were unable to receive their proper reimbursement because their repayment was opposed by States that had provided much less than their proportionate share (e.g., Georgia and South Carolina). The Articles indeed were “exhibited to the world only as a monument of impotence and imbecility.”

For additional information on the problems with the Articles of Confederation, see the note on pp. 109–110.

¹⁰ The “lyre of Orpheus” refers to a constellation of stars named “Lyre” (also spelled “Lyra”) that form a circle—like the bottom part of a stringed lyre. In Greek mythology, Orpheus had played the lyre skillfully and beautifully; when he was

concluded. Had the people of any one of the States pretended to the right of concluding a separate peace, the very fact would have operated as a dismemberment of the Union and could have been carried into effect only by the return of that portion of the people to the condition of British subjects.

Thirdly, the Declaration of Independence announced the One People *assuming their station among the powers of the earth* as a civilized, religious, and Christian people—acknowledging themselves bound by the obligations and claiming the rights to which they were entitled by the *laws of nature and of nature’s God*.¹¹

treacherously killed, Zeus retrieved the instrument and set it among the stars as a permanent memorial to Orpheus—thus the “lyre of Orpheus”. The thirteen stars that formed a circle in the first American flag were likened to the “lyre of Orpheus”—a permanent memorial (just like the stellar constellation)—a memorial that became “the standard [the symbol] of the Union.” Interestingly, the “lyre of Orpheus” was also a part of the Adams’ family seal, and it may well have been John Adams in 1777 (at that time serving on the American Board of War) who suggested the circle of stars as part of the flag. In short, Adams is saying that the non-ending circle of stars, reminiscent of “the lyre of Orpheus” and signifying the non-ending Union of the States then appearing on the American flag, had become the symbol for the Union.

¹¹ The phrase “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” was taken from one of the most famous and widely-used legal works of that generation: *Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws* by Sir William Blackstone (1723–1780). So influential was Blackstone on the thinking of the Founders that he is documented as the second most-invoked political authority during the Founding Era (1760–1805).

Blackstone’s Commentaries eventually became the official law book adopted by the US Senate, and Supreme Court Justice James Iredell (appointed by President George Washington) declared that Blackstone’s views were heavily relied upon during the framing of the Bill of Rights. So important was Blackstone to America that Thomas Jefferson even commented that American lawyers used Blackstone’s with the same dedication and reverence that Muslims used the Koran.

With the Founders’ heavy reliance on Blackstone, it is not surprising that many of them (including James Madison, James Wilson, John Adams, Henry Laurens, Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, James Madison, James Otis, James Kent, Joseph Story, Fisher Ames, and many others) either endorsed or relied on Blackstone in their own legal writings.

So how did Blackstone define “the laws of nature” and the laws “of nature’s God” (also called by Blackstone “the law of revelation”)—the phrase incorporated into the Declaration of Independence by the Founders? According to Blackstone:

Man, considered as a creature, must necessarily be subject to the laws of his Creator, for he is entirely a dependent being.... And consequently, as man depends absolutely upon his Maker for everything, it is necessary that he should in all points conform to his Maker’s will. This will of his Maker is called *the law of nature*.... This law of nature, being coeval [coexistent] with mankind and dictated by God Himself is, of course, superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times; no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this; and such of them as are valid derive all their force and all their authority, mediately or immediately, from this original.... The doctrines thus delivered we call the revealed or divine law and they are to be found only in the holy Scriptures [i.e., the “*law of nature’s God*”].

They had [originally] formed a subordinate portion of an European Christian nation in the condition of Colonies. The European Colonies in America had all been settled by Christian nations; and the first of them (settled before the reformation of Luther) had sought their justification for taking possession of lands inhabited by men of another race in a grant of authority from the successor of Saint Peter at Rome for converting the natives of the country to the Christian code of religion and morals.¹² After the Reformation, the kings of England (substituting themselves in the place of the Roman Pontiff as heads of the Church) granted charters for the same benevolent purposes;¹³ and as these colonial establishments successively arose, worldly purposes, the

These precepts, when revealed, are found upon comparison to be really a part of the original law of nature.... Upon these **two** foundations, the law of nature and the law of revelation, depend all human laws; that is to say, no human laws should be suffered [permitted] to contradict these.

While today “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” is not understood to be a significant legal phrase or even to carry any religious implications, the fact is clear that under the philosophy articulated by Blackstone and embraced and set forth in the Declaration by the Founders, civil laws could not contradict the laws of God revealed either through nature or the Bible—i.e., “the laws of nature and of nature’s God.”

¹² The “grant of authority from the successor of Saint Peter at Rome” (the Pope) for “converting the natives of the country to the Christian code of religion and morals” was actually more of an indirect grant of authority. That is, the Pope would sanction a Catholic monarch to develop the New World (or a particular region of it) and the Catholic monarch, when sending an expedition to that part of the New World, would dispatch Catholic missionaries to the Indians as part of the expedition. For example, after Pope Alexander VI (Pope from 1492–1503), a Spaniard, recognized Spain’s right to take possession of the entire New World following its “discovery” by Columbus, Spain dispatched numerous expeditions into Mexico, Central, and South America; on every expedition were missionary priests (usually Dominican, Franciscan, or Jesuit) to convert the Indians. Therefore, while “the grant of authority” for the New World came from the Pope, it was the Catholic monarchs—both French and Spanish—who implemented the missionary aspects of “converting the natives.”

The soldiers and leaders on these Catholic expeditions often resorted to violence “for taking possession of lands inhabited by men of another race,” although the forcible conversion of natives more frequently characterized Spanish than French missions. Pope Paul III (Pope from 1534–1550) later tried to change the “forcible conversion” policy, but his words were largely ignored by the monarchs. Spain and France both had been particularly unaffected by the Reformation and—providentially for American liberty—those two nations did not have much lasting influence in the settling of the eastern shore of America. (France’s influence primarily was to the far north, in and along Canada, while Spain’s influence primarily was in the far southern, southwestern, and western regions of the continent.) The colonists who arrived to settle America’s eastern seaboard were largely English and were steeped in the ideas of the Reformation rather than the Spanish and French models; and it was a notable distinction that they purchased rather than took lands from the Indians (e.g., the Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation Colony, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the settlers of the New Haven Colony, etc.)—a practice in direct contrast to the methods of settlement used in Mexico, Central and South America. That early favorable practice of the English religious settlers in the east regrettably was largely abandoned in America’s later westward expansion.

¹³ Examples of charters granted by English kings “for the same benevolent purposes” included the Charter of Virginia, issued by King James in 1606 for the purpose—among others—of “propagating of Christian religion to such people as yet

spirit of adventure, and religious persecution took their place (together with the conversion of the heathen) among the motives for the European establishments in this Western Hemisphere.¹⁴ Hence had arisen among the colonizing nations a customary law under which the commerce of all colonial settlements was confined exclusively to the metropolis or Mother Country. The Declaration of Independence cast off all the shackles of this dependency. The United States of America were no longer Colonies. They were an independent Nation of Christians....

In setting forth the justifying causes of their separation from Great Britain, your fathers opened the fountains of the great deep. For the first time since the creation of the world, the act which constituted a great people laid the foundation of their government upon the unalterable and eternal principles of human rights. They were comprised in a few short sentences and were delivered with the unqualified confidence of self-evident truths.

We hold, says the Declaration, these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute a new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness....

The history of mankind had never before furnished an example of a government directly and expressly instituted upon this principle.... [until] the Declaration of Independence.... And never from that to the present day has there been one moment of regret on the part of the people whom they thus declared independent at this mighty change of their condition, nor one moment of distrust of the justice of that declaration....

Every individual whose name was affixed to that paper has finished his career upon earth, and who at this day would not deem it a blessing to have had his name recorded on that list? The act of abolishing the government under which they had lived—of renouncing and abjuring [disavowing] the allegiance by which they had been bound ...—stands recorded in the annals of the human race as one among the brightest achievements of human virtue, applauded on earth, ratified and confirmed by the fiat [decree] of Heaven....

live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God, and may in time bring the infidels and savages living in those parts to human civility and to a settled and quiet government.” Other charters with similar declarations included the Charter of New England (issued by King James in November 1620), the Charter of Maryland (issued by King Charles in 1632), the Charter of Rhode Island (issued by King Charles II in July 1663), and the Charter of Pennsylvania (issued by King Charles II in March 1681) with its declared purpose “to reduce the savage natives **by gentle and just manners** to the love of civil society and Christian religion.”

¹⁴ The “spirit of adventure” that replaced the “benevolent purposes” of evangelization was seen in charters such as that of Georgia (1732) that declared one of its purposes was to “not only gain a comfortable subsistence ... but also strengthen our colonies and increase the trade, navigation and wealth of these realms.” The 1st Virginia Charter (1606) issued by King James I authorized the colonists “to dig, mine, and search for all manner of mines of gold, silver, and copper ... and have and enjoy the gold, silver, and copper to be gotten.” The New York Charter (1663) issued by King Charles II similarly authorized the colonists to collect “revenues and profits” from the lands. In each case, the Mother Country (whether France, Spain, Holland, or England) wanted all the profits and commerce coming out of her colonies.

The position thus assumed by this One People consisting of thirteen free and independent States was new in the history of the world. It was complicated and compounded of [formed from] elements never before believed susceptible of being blended together.... By the affirmation that the principal natural rights of mankind are unalienable, it placed them beyond the reach of organized human power; and by affirming that governments are instituted to secure them—and may and ought to be abolished if they become destructive of those ends—they made all government subordinate to the moral supremacy of the people.... This was a novelty in the moral philosophy of nations and it is the essential point of difference between the system of government announced in the Declaration of Independence and those systems which had until then prevailed among men. A moral Ruler of the Universe—the Governor and Controller of all human power—is the only unlimited sovereign acknowledged by the Declaration of Independence, and it claims for the United States of America (when assuming their equal station among the nations of the earth) only the power to do all that may be done of right.

Threescore and one years have passed away since this Declaration was issued and we may now *judge of the tree by its fruit* [MATTHEW 12:33; LUKE 6:44]. It was a bold and hazardous step when considered merely as the act of separation of the Colonies from Great Britain. Had the cause in which it was issued failed, it would have subjected every individual who signed it to the pains and penalties of treason—to a cruel and ignominious [shameful] death.¹⁵ But inflexible as were the spirits and intrepid [courageous] as were the hearts of the patriots (who by this act set at defiance the colossal power of the British Empire), bolder and more intrepid still were the souls which at that crisis in human affairs dared to proclaim the new and fundamental principles upon which their incipient [newborn] Republic was to be founded. It was an experiment upon the heart of man....

The Declaration had laid the foundation of all civil government in the unalienable natural rights of individual man of which it had specifically named three: *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*, declaring them to be among others not enumerated [specifically mentioned]. The Revolution had been exclusively popular and democratic, and the Declaration had announced that the only object of the institution of governments among men was to secure their unalienable rights, and that they *derived their just powers from the consent of the governed*....

They reported on the twelfth of July (eight days after the Declaration of Independence) a draft of Articles of Confederation and perpetual union between the Colonies, naming them all from New Hampshire to Georgia....

¹⁵ A “cruel and ignominious death” was definitely a certainty if the Revolution failed since the very act of separation was viewed by the king as an act of treason and therefore would have subjected the signers to the most painful forms of death. However, even though victory and independence were ultimately achieved for America, many of the signers still suffered a cruel death at the hands of the British. For example, of the 56 signers of the Declaration, nine died during the American Revolution, including three directly at the hands of the British; two others were so abused by the British as prisoners of war that they died shortly after the Revolution; two lost wives at the hands of the British (and four lost children in the same way); 17 had their homes, estates, or property pillaged or destroyed by the British; and many others paid similarly high prices. Therefore, even though death was a certainty if the signers lost the Revolution, it was no less a reality for many of them in fulfillment of their personal pledge of their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” to achieve American independence.

[I]n the original draft reported by the select committee¹⁶ on the twelfth of July, the first words of the second article were, “The said Colonies unite themselves so as never to be divided by any act whatever.” Precious words! Words pronounced by the infant nation at the instant of her rising from the baptismal font! Words bursting from their hearts and uttered by lips yet glowing with the touch from the coal of the Declaration! [c.f., ISAIAH 6:5–7] ...

From the twentieth of August, 1776, to the eighth of April, 1777—(although the Congress was in permanent session without recess but from day to day) no further action upon the revised draft reported by the committee of the whole was had. The interval was the most gloomy and disastrous period of the war.¹⁷ The debates on the draft of articles reported by the first committee had evolved and disclosed all the sources of disunion existing between the several sections of the country.... State prejudice, State jealousy, were soon embodied under the banners of State sovereignty. And while the cause of freedom and independence itself was drooping under the calamities of war and pestilence, with a penniless treasury and an all but disbanded army, the Congress of the people had no heart to proceed in the discussion of a confederacy overrun by a victorious enemy and on the point—to all external appearance—of being crushed by the wheels of a conqueror’s triumphal car....

¹⁶ The select committee assigned to draft the Articles of Confederation consisted of one delegate from each State: Josiah Bartlett (NH), Samuel Adams (MA), Stephen Hopkins (RI), Roger Sherman (CT), Robert Livingston (NY), John Dickinson (PA), Thomas McKean (DE), Thomas Stone (MD), Thomas Nelson (VA), Joseph Hewes (NC), Edward Rutledge (SC), and Button Gwinnett (GA). There was no delegate from New Jersey because at the time the committee was formed, New Jersey was sending new delegates to the Continental Congress and none had as yet arrived; the former New Jersey delegates had resigned to attend to new posts and responsibilities, with an effective resignation date prior to the committee appointment by Congress (e.g., John DeHart resigned and went home to help draft the State constitution; William Livingston resigned to take a military commission; Jonathan Dickinson Sargeant resigned to take a seat at the State level; etc.).

¹⁷ From mid-August 1776 to mid-August 1777, nothing seemed to go right for the American army. On August 27–29, 1776, Washington’s forces were crushed by British General Howe at the Battle of Long Island, forcing the Americans to beat a hasty retreat; on September 11, a peace conference between the British and the Americans failed; on September 16, a massive fire broke out in upper Manhattan, destroying over 300 buildings; on September 22, Nathan Hale was caught by the British and summarily executed; on October 11, the American navy was almost destroyed at the Battle of Lake Champlain; two weeks later on October 22, Washington was defeated in the Battle of White Plains; in November, Washington suffered two additional defeats with almost 3,000 American casualties and the loss of 100 cannons, thousands of muskets, and an important American fort; on December 6, the British took an American naval base in Rhode Island; and on December 11, Congress evacuated Philadelphia, fearing an imminent British attack. On December 25–26, 1776, following Washington’s famous crossing of the Delaware River, he did win two minor military victories at Trenton and Princeton; nevertheless, overall this was indeed “the most gloomy and disastrous” period in the Revolution. In fact, even in the weeks following that period, more difficulty was forthcoming for General Washington. American General Horatio Gates won a major American victory at Saratoga but Washington lost the battles of Brandywine and Germantown. This resulted in a move among some military officers to oust Washington from command and replace him with General Gates (a failed insurrection called the “Conway Cabal”). Indeed, mid-1776 through 1777 was unquestionably “the most gloomy and disastrous period of the war” both for the nation collectively and for Washington personally.

[T]he fifteenth of November, 1777, the Articles of Confederation as finally natured and elaborated were concluded and sent forth to the State legislatures for their adoption. They were to take effect only when approved by them all, and ratified with their authority by their delegates in Congress.... The first article in them all gave the name (or as it was at last called, the “style”) of the confederacy: “The United States of America”—the name by which the nation has ever since been known, and now illustrious among the nations of the earth. The second article of the plans reported to the Congress by the original committee and by the committee of the whole constituted and declared the Union in the first project commencing with those most affecting and ever-memorable words: “The said Colonies united themselves so as never to be divided by any act whatever.” In the project reported by the committee of the whole, these words were struck out.... [and the] reservation of the rights of the separate States was made to precede the institution of the Union itself.... How different from the spirit of the article which began—“The said Colonies unite themselves so as never to be divided by any act whatever!”

The institution of the Union was now postponed to follow and not to precede the reservations, and cooled into a mere league of friendship and of mutual defense between the States.... It [the Articles of Confederation] was the statue of Pygmalion before its animation—beautiful and lifeless. And where was the vital spark which was to quicken this marble into life? It was in the Declaration of Independence.¹⁸

Analyze—at this distance of time—the two documents with cool and philosophical impartiality and you will exclaim, “Never—never since the creation of the world—did two state papers emanating from the same body of men exhibit more dissimilarity of character or more conflict of principle!” The Declaration: glowing with the spirit of union—speaking with one voice the vindication of One People for the act of separating themselves from another, and ascending to the First Cause, the Dispenser of Eternal Justice, for the foundation of its reasoning. The Articles of Confederation: stamped with the features of contention, beginning with niggardly [stingy] reservations of corporate rights, and in the grant of powers seeming to have fallen into the frame of mind described by the sentimental traveler bargaining for a post chaise [a carriage for rent] and viewing his conventionist [the owner of the carriage] with an eye as if he were going with him to fight a duel!

Yet let us not hastily charge our fathers with inconsistency for these repugnances [contradictions] between their different works. Let us never forget that the jealousy of power is the watchful handmaid to the spirit of freedom.... Let the obstacles which they encountered and surmounted teach us how much easier it is in morals and politics (as well as in natural philosophy and physics) to pull down than to build up, to demolish than to construct.... Providence watched over, protected, and guided our political infancy and led our ancestors finally to retrace their steps, to correct their errors, and resort to the whole People of the Union for a constitution of government emanating from themselves which might realize that union so feelingly expressed by the first draft of their confederation so as “never to be divided by any act whatever.”

¹⁸ Pygmalion—a talented sculptor in ancient Greek mythology—once carved (according to the legends) the figure of a woman that was so beautiful that he fell in love with the lifeless statue, treating it as if it were alive—he clothed it, jeweled it, and even brought it gifts. Pygmalion went to the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love) to pray for a wife. Aphrodite heard his prayers and went to his home to see the statue. She was so impressed that she brought the statue to life and it became Pygmalion’s wife. JQA is saying that like Aphrodite in the story, the Declaration of Independence was the source of life, while the statue (the Articles of Confederation) was in and of itself lifeless.

The origin and history of this Constitution is doubtless familiar to most of my hearers and should be held in perpetual remembrance by us all. It was the consummation of the Declaration of Independence. It has given the sanction of half a century's experience to the principles of that Declaration. The attempt to sanction them by a confederation of sovereign States was made and signally [miserably] failed. It was five years in coming to an immature birth, and expired after five years of languishing and impotent existence.

On the seventeenth of next September [1837], fifty years will have passed away since the Constitution of the United States was presented to the people for their acceptance... And what a happy—what a glorious—career have the people passed through in the half-century of their (and your) existence associated under it!...

Are the blessings of good government manifested by the enjoyment of liberty, by the security of property, by the freedom of thought, of speech, of action, pervading every portion of the community? Appeal to your own experience, my fellow citizens; and after answering without hesitation or doubt, affirmatively, all these inquiries (save the last)—if, when you come to them, you pause before you answer—if, within the last five or seven years of your history, ungracious recollections of untoward [disturbing] events crowd upon your memory and grate upon the feelings appropriate to this consecrated day¹⁹—let them not disturb the serenity of your enjoyments or interrupt the harmony of that mutual gratulation in which you may yet all cordially join. But fix well in your minds what were the principles first proclaimed by your forefathers as the only foundations of lawful government upon earth....

And this, my fellow citizens—or I have mistaken the motives by which you have been actuated [motivated]—is the purpose for which you are here assembled. It is to enjoy the bounties of Heaven for the past and to prepare for the duties of the future. It is to review the principles proclaimed by the founders of your empire—[and] to examine ... what portion of them it is your first of duties to retain, to preserve, to redeem, to transmit to your offspring to be cherished, maintained, and transmitted to their posterity of unnumbered ages to come.

We have consulted the records of the past and I have appealed to your consciousness of the present, and what is the sound which they send forth to all the echoes of futurity but “Union”—Union as one People—Union so as to be divided by no act whatever. We have a sound of modern days; could it have come from an American

¹⁹ The events that occurred “within the last five or seven years” that would include “ungracious recollections of untoward events” involve primarily the nullification and secession crisis of 1832. The controversy—according to the “offended” parties—had stemmed from tariff acts passed by Congress (1816, 1824, 1828). The South Carolina legislature objected to those tariffs, claiming they harmed her economy. She therefore unilaterally declared the federal tariff laws to be null and void (i.e., nullification) and threatened armed resistance as well as secession if the tariff laws were enforced. President Andrew Jackson was not to be bullied, threatened, or intimidated. He sent Gen. Winfield Scott and US troops to Charleston to enforce the act and warned of a full invasion of South Carolina by military force. Significantly, it had been Jackson's own Vice-President, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, who had fueled the nullification convention and the secession movement precipitating the crisis. In Congress, Henry Clay of Kentucky worked out the passage of a federal law that gradually reduced tariffs over the next decade, thus averting the immediate crisis. Nevertheless, a civil war and the destruction of the Union had been seriously threatened “in the last five or seven years” before this oration—an incident still fresh on the minds of the citizens and therefore an “ungracious recollection of an untoward [disturbing] event.”

voice that the value of the Union is to be calculated? Calculated by what system of arithmetic? By what rule of proportion? [If you c]alculate the value of maternal tenderness and of filial affection—calculate the value of nuptial [marriage] vows, of compassion to human suffering, of sympathy with affliction, of piety to God, and of charity to man—calculate the value of all that is precious to the heart and all that is binding upon the soul—and then you will have the elements with which to calculate the value of the Union. But if cotton or tobacco, rocks or ice, metallic money or mimic paper are to furnish the measure, the stamp act was the invention of a calculating statesman. “Great financier! Stupendous calculator!”²⁰ ...

The calculators of the value of the Union who would palm upon you in the place of this sublime invention a mere cluster of sovereign confederated States do but *sow the wind to reap the whirlwind* [HOSEA 8:7]. One lamentable evidence of deep degeneracy from the spirit of the Declaration of Independence... has, indeed, presented itself in its most malignant form in that portion of the Union, the civil institutions of which are most infected with the gangrene of slavery [the South].

The inconsistency of the institution of domestic slavery with the principles of the Declaration of Independence was seen and lamented by all the southern patriots of the Revolution—by no one with deeper and more unalterable conviction than by the author of the Declaration himself [Thomas Jefferson]. No charge of insincerity or hypocrisy can be fairly laid to their [the Southern Founders’] charge. Never from their lips was

²⁰ John Quincy Adams is here referring to points of contention between the North and the South. For example, “cotton or tobacco” referred to the slave crops of the South, and “metallic money or mimic paper” referred to the national bank controversy (the North was for a national bank, the South opposed it). The South was threatening secession over these issues, and John Quincy Adams is stating that the Union should be measured by values more important than “cotton or tobacco, rocks or ice, metallic money or mimic paper.” He then sarcastically notes that *if* such inferior standards are to be used to measure the value of the nation, then the odious 1765 Stamp Act of Lord Grenville (1759–1834; British Prime Minister) that became a principal focal point in America’s separation from Great Britain “was the invention of a calculating statesman”—that is, those attempting to calculate the worth of the Union by their own right of nullification will fail just as badly as did Lord Grenville in calculating that the Stamp Act would bring new revenues into British coffers.

heard one syllable of attempt to justify the institution of slavery.²¹ They universally considered it as a reproach fastened upon them by the unnatural stepMother Country, and they saw that before the principles of the Declaration of Independence, slavery—in common with every other mode of oppression—was destined sooner or later to be banished from the earth.²² Such was the undoubting conviction of Jefferson to his dying day. In

²¹ Interestingly, the fact that the Founding Fathers neither justified slavery nor desired it to remain in America was even confirmed in a speech by congressional Democrat Alexander Stephens (1812–1883) of Georgia, the slave-holding Vice-President of the Confederate States of America. In an 1862 speech entitled *African Slavery: the Corner-Stone of the Southern Confederacy*, Stephens explained that the Founding Fathers—even those from the South—did not intend for slavery to remain a part of the nation. According to Stephens:

The prevailing ideas entertained by him [Thomas Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature—that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with; but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other, in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent [temporary] and pass away.... Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error, and the idea of a government built upon it; when the “storm came and the wind blew, it fell.” Our new government [the Confederate States of America] is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid—its cornerstone rests—upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man. That slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and moral condition. This—our new government—is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.

Hence, the justification of slavery was a doctrine neither introduced nor promulgated by the Founders—a fact acknowledged by subsequent pro-slavery leaders such as Stephens, thus confirming Adams’ statement regarding the Founders that “never from their lips was heard one syllable of attempt to justify the institution of slavery.”

²² Even though the issue of slavery is often raised as a discrediting charge against the Founding Fathers, as noted above by Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens, the Founding Fathers had no intention of allowing slavery to remain a permanent fixture in the United States. Slavery was not the product of, nor was it an evil introduced by, the Founding Fathers; it had been introduced into America nearly two centuries before the Founders. As President of Congress Henry Laurens explained:

I abhor slavery [but] I was born in a country where slavery had been established by British Kings and Parliaments, as well as by the laws of the country, ages before my existence.... [T]he day, I hope, is approaching when—from principles of gratitude as well as justice—every man will strive to be foremost in showing his readiness to comply with the Golden Rule [“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” MATTHEW 7:12].

Many of the Founders openly complained about the fact that Great Britain had forcefully imposed the evil of slavery upon the Colonies. For example, Thomas Jefferson complained:

He [King George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into

slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.... Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce [that is, he has opposed efforts to prohibit the slave trade].

And Benjamin Franklin, in a 1773 letter to Dean Woodward, confirmed that whenever the Americans had attempted to end slavery, the British government had thwarted those attempts. Franklin explained that

... a disposition to abolish slavery prevails in North America, that many of Pennsylvanians have set their slaves at liberty, and that even the Virginia Assembly have petitioned the King for permission to make a law for preventing the importation of more into that colony. This request, however, will probably not be granted as their former laws of that kind have always been repealed.

The Revolution—the opportunity for America to create a new nation with new policies—was a turning point in the national attitude against slavery. Although a few Founding Founders supported slavery, the clear majority of them opposed it, and many of them who had owned slaves as British citizens released them in the years following America’s separation from Great Britain (e.g., George Washington, John Dickinson, Caesar Rodney, William Livingston, George Wythe, John Randolph, and others). Furthermore, many of the Founders had *never* owned a slave. As John Adams thundered, “[M]y opinion against it [slavery] has always been known ... [N]ever in my life did I own a slave.”

Notice a few additional examples of the strong anti-slavery sentiments held by great numbers of the Founders:

Christianity, by introducing into Europe the truest principles of humanity, universal benevolence, and brotherly love, had happily abolished civil slavery. Let us who profess the same religion practice its precepts ... by agreeing to this duty. RICHARD HENRY LEE, PRESIDENT OF CONGRESS, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

I hope we shall at last—and if it so please God, I hope it may be during my lifetime—see this cursed thing [slavery] taken out.... For my part, whether in a public station or a private capacity, I shall always be prompt to contribute my assistance towards effecting so desirable an event. WILLIAM LIVINGTON, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION, GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY

Slavery, or an absolute and unlimited power in the master over the life and fortune of the slave, is unauthorized by the common law.... The reasons which we sometimes see assigned for the origin and the continuance of slavery appear—when examined to the bottom—to be built upon a false foundation. In the enjoyment of their persons and of their property, the common law protects all. JAMES WILSON, SIGNER OF THE CONSTITUTION, US SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

As much as I value a union of all the States, I would not admit the Southern States into the Union unless they agree to the discontinuance of this disgraceful [slave] trade. GEORGE MASON, “FATHER OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS”

[W]hy keep alive the question of slavery? It is admitted by all to be a great evil. CHARLES CARROLL, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION, A FRAMER OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS

Domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity.... It is rebellion against the authority of a common Father. It is a practical denial of the extent and efficacy of the death of a common Savior. It is an

the *Memoir of his Life* (written at the age of seventy-seven), he gave to his countrymen the solemn and emphatic warning that the day was not distant when they must hear and adopt the general emancipation of their slaves. “Nothing is more certainly written,” said he, “in the book of fate, then that these people are to be free.” [JEFFERSON’S *WRITINGS* (1830), VOL. 1, P. 40.] My countrymen! It is written in a better volume than the book of fate—it is written in *the laws of nature and of nature’s God!*²³

We are now told (indeed, by the learned doctors of the nullification school) that color operates as a forfeiture of the rights of human nature—that a dark skin turns a man into a chattel [personal property]—that crispy [curly] hair transforms a human being into a four-footed beast.

The master-priest [i.e., slave-owning Southern clergymen] informs you that slavery is consecrated and sanctified by the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament—that Ham was the father of Canaan and that all his posterity were doomed by his own father to be hewers of wood and drawers of water to the descendants of Shem and Japheth [c.f., GENESIS 9:25–27]—that the native Americans of African descent are the children of Ham, with the curse of Noah still fastened upon them; and the native Americans of European descent are children of Japheth—pure Anglo-Saxon blood, born to command and to live by the sweat of another’s brow.

The master-philosopher [i.e., slave-owning Southern philosopher] teaches you that slavery is no curse but a blessing!—that Providence—Providence!—has so ordered it that this country should be inhabited by two races of men: one born to wield the scourge [the whip] and the other to bear the record of its stripes upon his back—one to earn through a toilsome life the other’s bread and to feed him on a bed of roses; that slavery is the guardian and promoter of wisdom and virtue; that the slave, by laboring for another’s enjoyment, learns disinterestedness [a lack of desire for personal improvement] and humility, and to melt with tenderness and affection for his master; that the master—nurtured, clothed, and sheltered by another’s toils—learns to be generous and grateful to the slave and sometimes to feel for him as a father for his child; that released from the

usurpation of the prerogative of the great Sovereign of the universe who has solemnly claimed an exclusive property in the souls of men. BENJAMIN RUSH, SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION

For many of the Founders, their feelings against slavery went beyond words. For example, in 1774, Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush founded America’s first anti-slavery society, and John Jay was president of a similar society in New York. In fact, many prominent Founding Fathers were members of societies for ending slavery, including William Livingston, Richard Bassett, James Madison, James Monroe, Bushrod Washington, Charles Carroll, William Few, John Marshall, Richard Stockton, Zephaniah Swift, and many more. Based in part on the efforts of these Founders, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts began abolishing slavery in 1780; Connecticut and Rhode Island did so in 1784; Vermont in 1786; New Hampshire in 1792; New York in 1799; and New Jersey in 1804.

As John Quincy Adams noted, the Founders saw that “slavery ... was destined to be banished from the earth.” Although the end of slavery did not occur in the Founders’ lifetime (or for nearly a century afterwards), it was not because they lacked the desire; they simply were ahead of the rest of the nation—and this was especially true with the Founding Fathers from the South (e.g., George Mason, George Washington, James Madison, etc.) who were far ahead of most citizens in their own States on this issue. (For additional information on the Founders’ views toward slavery, see *Original Intent* by David Barton, pp. 289–295.)

²³ See previous note about this phrase on pp. 197–198.

necessity of supplying his own wants, he acquires opportunity of leisure to improve his mind, to purify his heart, to cultivate his taste; that he has time on his hands to plunge into the depths of philosophy and to soar to the clear empyrean of seraphic morality [highest heaven of pure angelic morality].

The master-statesman [i.e., the slave-owning Southern political leader]—ay, the statesman in the land of the Declaration of Independence, in the halls of national legislation with the muse of history recording his words as they drop from his lips,²⁴ with the colossal figure of American liberty leaning on a column entwined with the emblem of eternity over his head,²⁵ with the forms of Washington and Lafayette speaking to him from the

²⁴ The US Constitution requires in ARTICLE 1, SECTION 5, PARA. 3 that everything said on the floor of the House and Senate be recorded in official records; thus is “the muse of history recording his words as they drop from his lips” in the “halls of national legislation.”

²⁵ John Quincy Adams—who was at this time a Member of the US House and often engaged in contentious debates with Southern pro-slavery House Members—is describing several pieces of art and sculpture found in the House Chambers that all Members, whether from the North or the South, saw each day—sculptures and art that carried an unequivocal message of freedom, not slavery. Specifically, in a compartment above the Speaker’s desk in the House was a sculpture named “Liberty and the Eagle,” placed there between 1817–1819 when the Capitol was rebuilt after the fire of 1814. This “colossal figure of American liberty” was looking down on the pro-slavery Members; they ignored its clear message.

canvas²⁶—turns to the image of the Father of his Country and (forgetting that the last act of his life was to emancipate his slaves) to bolster the cause of slavery says, “That man was a slaveholder!”²⁷

²⁶ By noting the “forms of Washington and La Fayette speaking ... from the canvas,” Adams is referring to the only two paintings that hang within the chamber of the US House: one of George Washington (painted in 1834) and one of Lafayette (given to the Capitol in 1824). Significantly, both Washington and Lafayette were leaders in efforts to end slavery. Adams notes that the Southern statesmen were in a chamber surrounded by emblems of liberty and paintings of anti-slavery leaders but still refused to recognize what their eyes daily saw.

²⁷ Adams here is referring to statements made by John C. Calhoun (1782–1850), a slaveholder from South Carolina and prominent political leader. Ironically, when John Quincy Adams—an ardent abolitionist—was elected President by the US House, John C. Calhoun—an ardent pro-slavery leader and active opponent of Adams—was elected Adams’ Vice-President by the US Senate. As can be imagined, the relationship between the two was at best rocky. Furthermore, Calhoun was the father of the South Carolina nullification/secession movement (vehemently opposed by Adams) that later became the impetus for the Civil War.

Calhoun invoked George Washington as an authority to justify slavery—as he did in a Senate speech on March 4, 1850, declaring of Washington: “He was one of us—a slaveholder and a planter.” Adams, of course, points to the side of Washington ignored by Calhoun: Washington’s anti-slavery side—a side little discussed today but nonetheless very significant.

Washington had been born into a world in which slavery was accepted; he himself had become a slave owner at the tender age of 11 when his father died, leaving him slaves as an inheritance. As other family members died, Washington inherited even more slaves. Although he had grown up from his earliest youth as a slave owner, he worked to overthrow the very system in which he had been raised.

For example, as a member of the Virginia Assembly, he announced:

I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by legislative authority; and this—as far as my suffrage [vote and support] will go—shall never be wanting [lacking].

Washington even chaired legislative committees that called for an end to slavery, but his own State never agreed to his proposals. He therefore lamented:

I wish from my soul that the legislature of this State could see the policy of a gradual abolition of slavery.

Washington had committed himself to seeking a legal remedy by which slaves might be freed in his State and he also did so on the national level. In fact, the first federal law limiting slavery in America (passed on August 7, 1789) carried the approving signature of President George Washington. It was because of this law that Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, etc., prohibited slavery. (This policy unfortunately was changed by Congress in 1820 to allow the expansion of slavery.)

My countrymen! These are the tenets of the modern nullification school. Can you wonder that they shrink from the light of free discussion? That they skulk from the grasp of freedom and truth?... No! No! Freedom of speech is the only safety valve which—under the high pressure of slavery—can preserve your political boiler from a fearful and fatal explosion.²⁸ ... Quench not the spirit of freedom. Let it go forth, not in the panoply

Although Washington had been unable to end slavery in his own State of Virginia, he circumvented State law by emancipating his slaves upon his death. Regrettably, State laws were then stiffened to close this loophole so that it became virtually impossible for anyone to emancipate his slaves—even at death.

The anti-slavery character of George Washington—especially the fact that he freed his own slaves—caused JQA to be mystified when Southerners such as Calhoun pointed to Washington as a justification for owning slaves.

²⁸ It was common that ardent supporters of slavery would employ brutal tactics to suppress anti-slavery speech. In fact, shortly after this oration, JQA personally authored the introduction to a book about a man martyred simply because he published his opinions against slavery (*Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; Who Was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837; with an Introduction by John Quincy Adams* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838).

Elijah Lovejoy (1802–1837)—a Presbyterian minister and publisher of a St. Louis, Missouri, newspaper—printed several articles against slavery. Following numerous threats against his life, he moved his paper to Alton, Illinois, a city in an anti-slavery State. Because he continued the inclusion of anti-slavery articles, pro-slavery mobs three times within a single year attacked and destroyed his press. On the fourth attack, Lovejoy was killed—shot five times by his attackers. In describing this incident, JQA explained:

[Lovejoy] there fell a victim to the fury of a band of ruffians, stung to madness and driven to despair for the fate of their darling slavery by the terrors of a printing press. That an American citizen, in a State whose constitution repudiates all slavery, should die a martyr in defence of the freedom of the press, is a phenomenon in the history of this Union.... [He is] the first American Martyr to THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, AND THE FREEDOM OF THE SLAVE.

The constitutional guarantees for freedom of speech and freedom of press were regularly ignored by pro-slavery advocates.

In fact, in 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society mailed 75,000 anti-slavery tracts throughout the South, inciting slave owners to enact State laws that—according to famous historian J.T. Headley—resulted in “pains and penalties inflicted on ‘abolitionists’ (as all were termed who dared to express sentiments condemnatory of slavery by the southern states); and men—and even women—were subjected to treatment that would disgrace barbarians.”

As an example of this intolerance of anti-slavery speech, in 1860 the Rev. Stephen Hodgman of Kentucky visited Texas and privately mentioned that if the South should secede, he thought the Union would eventually win and that slavery would be abolished; he therefore advised against the South seceding. For uttering these remarks in a *private* conversation, a town meeting was called and he was placed on “trial” against five leading citizens and political leaders of Hempstead, Texas. It was eventually proved that he was not an “abolitionist” and therefore—according to Hodgman—“I was released and, of course, I was free once more—but not to express my opinions.” Others did not fare as well, however; according to Hodgman, “hundreds of men had, during the past few months, fallen victims and been hung” for speech offenses.

[armor] of fleshly wisdom but with the promise of peace and the voice of persuasion, clad in the whole armor of truth, *conquering and to conquer* [REVELATION 6:2]!

Friends and fellow citizens! I speak to you with the voice as of one risen from the dead. Were I now (as I shortly must be) cold in my grave, and could the sepulchre unbar its gates and open to me a passage to this desk devoted to the worship of Almighty God,²⁹ I would repeat the question with which this discourse was introduced: “Why are you assembled in this place”? And one of you would answer me for all: Because the Declaration of Independence, with the voice of an angel from Heaven, *put to his mouth the sounding alchemy* [brass trumpet]³⁰ and proclaimed universal emancipation upon earth!...

The first words uttered by the genius of our country in announcing his existence to the world of mankind was, “Freedom to the slave! Liberty to the captives! Redemption! Redemption forever to the race of man from the yoke of oppression!” It is *not* the work of a day; it is *not* the labor of an age; it is *not* the consummation of a

The pro-slavery intolerance of anti-slavery speech was not limited solely to Southern States, for in May 1856, when anti-slavery Republican US Senator Charles Sumner (1811–1874) of Massachusetts spoke out against the evil and against slavery-promoters on the floor of the US Senate, pro-slavery Democrat US Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina came from the House over to the Senate floor and brutally and repeatedly clubbed Sumner over the head, causing such serious injuries that it was four years before Sumner could resume his duties in the Senate. Similarly, at an 1860 Boston lecture on “How Shall Slavery be Abolished?,” a proslavery mob attacked and broke up the meeting—and that in a State which not only outlawed slavery but also provided education, property, voting, and other rights for blacks.

These examples are simply a few from among scores; and while some occurred after JQA delivered this speech, the same flagrant disregard for the Constitution that so often characterized pro-slavery advocates had caused JQA to proclaim that “freedom of speech is the only safety valve which—under the high pressure of slavery—can preserve your political boiler from a fearful and fatal explosion.”

²⁹ John Quincy Adams delivered this oration in a church; hence he notes that he is speaking from “a desk [pulpit] devoted to the worship of Almighty God.”

³⁰ This quote comes from John Milton’s (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost* (1667), Book II. Milton is considered one of the most famous of English poets, and *Paradise Lost* is considered the greatest epic poem in the English language. That work is the story of Satan’s rebellion against God, and of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The full passage from which the above quote is taken states:

Toward the four winds four speedy cherubim,

Put to their mouths the sounding alchemy [brass trumpet],

By herald’s voice explained: the hollow abyss,

Heard far and wide, and all the host of hell,

With deafening shout returned them loud acclaim.

century that we are assembled to commemorate. *It is the emancipation of our race—it is the emancipation of man from the thralldom [bondage] of man!*

And is this the language of enthusiasm [an active imagination]? The dream of a distempered fancy [hallucinating mind]? Is it not rather the Voice of Inspiration? The language of Holy Writ? Why is it that the Scriptures—both of the Old and New Covenants—teach you upon every page to look forward to the time when *the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid?* [ISAIAH 11:6]. Why is it that six hundred years before the birth of the Redeemer, the sublimest of prophets—with lips touched by the hallowed fire from the hand of God [c.f., ISAIAH 6:5–7]—spoke and said, *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound?* (ISAIAH 61:1) And why is it that at the first dawn of the fulfillment of this prophecy—at the birthday of the Savior in the lowest condition of human existence—the angel of the Lord came in a flood of supernatural light upon the shepherds (witnesses of the scene) and said, *Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.* Why is it that there was suddenly with that angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men?* (LUKE 2:9–10, 13–14).

What are the *good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people?* The prophet had told you six hundred years before: . . . *good tidings to the meek, mercy to the afflicted, liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound* (ISAIAH 61:1).

It is generally admitted by Christians of all denominations that the fulfillment of this prophecy commenced at the birth of the Redeemer six hundred years after it was promulgated. That it did so commence was expressly affirmed by Jesus Himself Who, on His appearance in his missionary character at Nazareth (we are told by the gospel of Luke), went into the synagogue on the Sabbath-day and stood up to read. And there was delivered to Him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found this very passage which I have cited: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound! And he closed the book and gave it again to the minister and sat down* (LUKE 4:17–18, 20–21).

This was the deliberate declaration of the earthly object of His mission. He merely read the passage from the book of Isaiah [ISAIAH 61:1–2]. He returned the book to the minister and without application of what He had read, sat down. But that passage had been written six hundred years before. It was universally understood to refer to the expected Messiah. With what astonishment then must the worshippers in the synagogue of Nazareth have seen Him—an unknown stranger in the prime of manhood—stand up to read; on receiving the book, deliberately select and read that particular passage of the prophet and without another word, close the volume, return it to the minister, and sit down! The historian adds, *and the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue, were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears* [LUKE 4:20–21]....

The prophecy will therefore be fulfilled not only in the ears but in the will and in the practice of mankind. But how many generations of men—how many ages of time—will pass away before its entire and final fulfillment? Alas! More than eighteen hundred years have passed away since the fulfillment of that Scripture which announced the advent of the Savior and the blessed object of His mission. How long—O how long!—will it be before that object itself shall be accomplished? Not yet are we permitted to *go out with joy and to be*

led forth with peace. Not yet shall the mountains and the hills break forth before us into singing and all the trees of the field clap their hands. Not yet shall the fir tree come up instead of the thorn nor the myrtle-tree instead of the brier. But let no one despair of the final accomplishment of the whole prophecy. Still shall it be to the Lord for a name—for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (ISAIAH 55:12–13).

The prediction of the prophet—the self-declaration of the Messiah and His annunciation of the objects of His mission—have been and are fulfilled so far as depended upon His own agency [actions]. He declared Himself anointed to preach good tidings to the meek, and faithfully that mission was performed. He declared Himself sent to bind up the broken hearted, and this, too, how faithfully has it been performed! Yes, through all ages since His appearance upon earth, He has preached—and yet preaches—good tidings to the meek. He has bound up—He yet binds up—the broken hearted. He said He was sent to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison doors to them that are bound. But the execution of that promise was entrusted to the will of man.

Twenty centuries have nearly passed away and it is yet to be performed. But let no one surrender his Christian faith that the Lord of Creation will—in His own good time—realize a declaration made in His name—made in words such as were never uttered by the uninspired lips of man—in words worthy of omnipotence. The progress of the accomplishment of the prophecy is slow. It has baffled the hopes and disappointed the wishes of generation after generation of men. Yet, observe well the history of the human family since the birth of the Savior and you will see great, remarkable, and progressive approximations [gradual steps] towards it....

It is because this day is consecrated to the cause of human liberty that you are here assembled; and if the connection of that cause with the fulfillment of those clear, specific predictions of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets—re-announced and repeated by the unnumbered voices of the heavenly host at the birth of the Savior—has not heretofore been traced and exhibited in the celebrations of this day, may I not hope for your indulgence in presenting to you a new ray of glory in the halo that surrounds the memory of the day of your national independence?

Yes, from that day forth shall the nations of the earth hereafter say with the prophet, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace!* (ISAIAH 52:7). From that day forth shall they exclaim, *Sing, O heavens, and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains! for the Lord hath comforted His people and will have mercy upon His afflicted* (ISAIAH 49:13, 24–25). From that day forth, to the question: *Shall the prey be taken from the mighty or the lawful captive be delivered [freed]?*, shall be returned the answer of the prophet: *But thus saith the Lord, “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered; for I will contend with him that contends with thee, and I will save thy children”* [ISAIAH 49:24–25]. From that day forth (shall they say) commenced the opening of the last seal of prophetic felicity [heavenly joy] to the race of man upon earth when *the Lord God shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plow-shares and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more.* (ISAIAH 2:4)....

Turn, then, your faces and raise your hands to God and pray that in the merciful dispensations of His providence, He would hasten that happy time! Turn to yourselves and in the Declaration of Independence of your fathers, read the command to you—by the unremitting [never-ending] exercise of your highest energies—to hasten yourselves its consummation!■²,

² David Barton, *Celebrate Liberty! Famous Patriotic Speeches & Sermons*, 191-222 (Aledo, TX: WallBuildersPress, 2003).

Taken from the book by David Barton, *Celebrate Liberty! Famous Patriotic Speeches & Sermons*, 190 (Aledo, TX: WallBuildersPress, 2003).