

Today's Firestorm and the Declaration

By Larry P. Arnn

President, Hillsdale College

The following is adapted from remarks delivered on November 18, 2025, at a Hillsdale College reception in Franklin, Tennessee.

Two momentous things come together as the New Year approaches. The first is the 250th anniversary of the greatest document in political history, the Declaration of Independence. The second is the national firestorm that rages over its meaning.

Trump

The first of the contrary winds fueling our national firestorm is Donald Trump, who has closed out his first whirlwind year. Crime is down in several cities where he sent the National Guard. The economy is doing pretty well, and predictions are that it will continue, decline, or quicken (I think it will fluctuate). The stock market is high, and the range of predictions is the same. Iran and Hamas are weaker, thanks in vital part to Israel, and the cauldron of the Middle East is a little cooler. 300,000 fewer people work for the federal government (after the number had increased by 240,000 during the Biden administration). Military recruitment and defense spending are up, and Secretary of *War* Hegseth gave a stirring speech to the military about its purpose, which is to fight. Secretary of State Rubio has given some wonderful speeches about the purpose and manner of American foreign policy, and he and others shuttled around the Middle East at speed to put together a fragile yet promising peace deal. Secretary of Education McMahon has cut the Department in half and is after the rest. Secretary of the Interior Burgum is looking for ways to use the land, and Secretary of Energy Wright is looking for energy. Attorney General Bondi seems to know no fear. Vice President Vance frightened the daylights out of Europe, calling for the elimination of wokeness and for increased defense spending.

A blizzard of executive orders has given regulatory relief, stemmed the tide of DEI, and reduced the size and reach of the federal establishment. Shower pressure is up: you can now take a hot shower under a heavy stream. Pressure is up on colleges, too, which have been violating civil rights law systematically. Tariffs are higher here and abroad, and that is still shaking out. The federal debt is rising a bit slower. The border is closed. The Ukraine War is a stubborn disaster; Trump is working on it and asking Western Europe to pay the bill.

The Resistance

The other wind blows from the self-described “resistance” to the elected government, and it is picking up. The “No Kings” demonstrations have turned out a lot of people—or fewer than a lot, depending on who you talk to. Mamdani is the first self-proclaimed socialist Mayor-Elect of New York. Virginia went bluer. Jews have been harassed on our college campuses with almost European intensity. An assassin killed Charlie Kirk, and reports are that several Trump administration officials and their families have been moved onto military bases due to threats to their safety. Violent attacks upon law enforcement officers proliferate.

Zany radicalism abounds both on the left and the right, left and right being promiscuous terms that mean even less today than usual. Young people on the left seem enamored of Marx; on the right, many gravitate towards Nietzsche. Nick Fuentes, who has a big audience, professes to like both Hitler and Stalin, who to be fair did cooperate to carve up their neighbors before they waged merciless war on each other. Churchill made sense of that by saying that national socialism and communism differ as the North Pole differs from the South. Many young people do not seem to realize that the North and South Poles are bad places to live. Their confusion stems from reasons that are deep but also limpid, visible to the bottom.

What do we see when we look down to that bottom? We see a generation in which too many have been taught that the only truth is in the human will, which then becomes sovereign. The past is presented to them as a dark time, now happily superseded; therefore they learn no edifying or useful history. The quest for truth dies not only in the humanities, but increasingly in the sciences. To think there is one right answer to a math problem has been derided as a racist concept. And of course we confuse the sexes.

Gloria Steinem attributes the feminist saying, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” to a 22-year-old Australian, Irina Dunn, who said she wrote it first on the wall in a toilet stall. It perhaps did not occur to her that a fish and a bicycle could occupy that stall till kingdom come and never produce Irina Dunn. Such ignorance leaves boys free to become useless wimps or dangerous predators. It leaves too many women to themselves even if they wish to face the fulfilling trial of children. Little wonder we are not reproducing even at a replacement level. Little wonder that so many boys and girls gravitate toward different, if ultimately indistinguishable, wastelands.

When human will becomes sovereign, unencumbered by nature and divorced from God, we are left with movements—people organized to impose their will on their adversaries. This is the terminal product of historicist philosophy and modern social science: the war, not of all against all, but of movement against movement.

At the bottom of the rot is a set of doctrines that have remade the American government and are remaking the society. These doctrines are the abnegation of the Declaration of Independence. Under these doctrines there are no truths that last, no commands from above that must be obeyed. There is only what people do to one another, and by this process they shape the society and each other. What they ought to do does not enter into it.

This is the great “discovery” that plagues our day: the sovereignty of history, of time, and of circumstance. Discovering there is no “ought,” we can break free by reinventing everything according to our desires. This is why Nick Fuentes giggles while he calls for rape, the Gulag, and Auschwitz; why thuggish Antifa mobs have become the vanguard of the mainstream Left; why so many deny the fact of two biological sexes and defend the sexual mutilation of children. As the torturer O’Brien proves to his “student” Winston in George Orwell’s *1984*, two plus two equals five—or any number you please.

These doctrines have remade the American government. This can be seen in the change of the size of government, relative to the society, since progressivism took hold; in the change in the number of people working for the government; in the wealth gathered around Washington, D.C.; in the centralizing of authority and resources into the government and within government; in the level of taxation; and in the national debt.

Here is an easy measure: where are our laws made now? Are they made by the Congress or by unelected agencies? It was common doctrine in America’s Founding that the legislative power, the most important of the powers of government, cannot be delegated. Article I of the Constitution, which concerns the Congress—unlike the Articles concerning the executive and the judiciary—begins with the word “all”: “All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States. . . .” In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke writes: “The Legislative cannot transfer the Power of Making laws to any other hands; for it being but a delegated Power from the People, they who have it cannot pass it over to others.”

Senator Mike Lee of Utah keeps a cabinet in his office that looks to be over four feet high and over three feet wide. It contains the laws and regulations enacted by

the federal government *in a single two-year congressional session*. In the two-year sessions since 2000, an average of just under 4,800 pages per session were added by the Congress itself, and just over 150,000 pages per session were added by the bureaucracy. Nobody elected the bureaucracy to do that. Until a year ago, no one could even dismiss bureaucrats from office.

There is the firestorm, made up of two opposites colliding.

The Declaration of Independence

The solution to all this, if we will but adopt it, is found in the Declaration. It tells us what we are. It tells us how to govern ourselves. And say what you want about Donald Trump, but it is a fact that he loves the Declaration—he's had an original copy of it installed in the Oval Office—and wants the celebration of it to be full-throated.

In an extraordinary development, Hillsdale College has joined with the U.S. Department of Education, of all places, and with the White House to help with the celebration. We are making videos in the White House to mark the milestones in the year that led up to July 4, 1776. We are explaining the events and inviting people to read and understand the document. We are paying for all that ourselves. In addition, Hillsdale's online education office and Hillsdale Studios will be releasing two documentaries to explain the American Founding—one on Colonial America and one on the Revolution—the latter, we hope, in theaters first.

To “commemorate” is to remember together. It is time for us Americans to do that. It is not so hard. The Declaration is 1,350 words long. Its majesty is matched by its pithiness. It contains an entire account of the source, the purpose, and the manner of the government of the United States. In these three things is to be found the solution to our problems.

First, the source of our government: “the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God.” These are the things we know by seeing and thinking about the things around us in nature. The satire from Irina Dunn about the fish and the bicycle and the man and the woman would not be funny or meaningful, except we know by nature what is a fish, what is a bicycle, what is a man, and what is a woman, and we know how they are related or not related.

Under these laws of nature, the Declaration says “that all men are created equal.” Put any common noun in place of “man,” and the formula still works. For instance, all horses are created equal, all being equally horses. But men and horses are different things.

All men, meaning human beings, are equal in being human, which makes them equal in their rights. You can ride a horse. If you are a little boy or girl, you can even ride on the back of your father, but only if your father gives permission. Jefferson, explaining the Declaration shortly before his death on its 50th anniversary, wrote that “the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”

Similarly, in the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, Stephen Douglas asked Abraham Lincoln why a man might take his hog into the free territory of Nebraska and have it protected by law, but not his slave. Lincoln replied that there is no reason at all, if the hog and the slave are the same thing. But they are not. Even down in the slave states they recognized this, which is why they passed laws against teaching slaves to read but passed no such laws regarding hogs. Understanding these distinctions, we have the restoration of nature itself and of the moral law—recognized repeatedly in the Declaration—that constitutes the rights inherent in our humanity. Here we have the family, property, justice, work, learning, conscience, and worship. Nature is impossible of extinction until the last trumpet sounds, and therefore our rights cannot be extinguished. Everything we know, we know through our perception of nature and our understanding of the Divine.

Next, the purpose of our government: the Declaration describes to what end we are to be governed, namely the protection of our rights, the rights that are written in our nature. These are inherent in man himself, instilled by the Creator Himself. What are these rights? To do the things a human being can do by nature: think, work, speak, learn, worship, and defend. We are born able to do these things. We must do them or be diminished. We have a right to them.

Finally, the Declaration describes the manner in which we must be governed:

One, government must be representative in form. We the governed must consent to it. This is entirely natural and right. I can tell you from my experience running a

college that young people will put up with most anything if they have consented to it and almost nothing if they have not. That is human nature.

Two, government must be limited. It may only exercise the powers we delegate to it. Our rights are ours by nature, and we delegate authority to the government only on condition that our rights be protected, and only in certain ways. The Constitution, which follows the Declaration by eleven years but in principle follows it in every way, lays out a government in which local things are managed locally, by the people nearest and most affected. The federal government has only the specific powers delegated. Today, through a misreading of what is called the Commerce Clause in the Constitution, the federal government regulates everything down to the footpaths in Hillsdale, Michigan. It also has dominance in public finance, which is why the streets are too often untended and, in many cities, unpoliced. This is the cost of centralization.

Three, government must act in all dispositive ways through *elected* representatives. There were to be no permanent officials who make laws so numerous and so complex that we cannot read them. The unelected bureaucrats that fit this description today are the only ones with kingly powers among our leaders. In a delicious irony, it is they that the “No Kings” movement sets out to protect from our elected representatives.

Four, the powers of government must be divided, not concentrated. In the Declaration, they are united only in the hands of God, the perfect being, who appears in the Declaration as the legislature (“the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”), the executive (“Divine Providence”), and the judiciary (“Supreme Judge of the World”). Those powers are not to be combined in human hands.

Here in beautiful outline is the basis of our country, the most successful free country in history. Its anniversary is a chance to remember it.

A proper celebration of the Declaration will be helpful in all our troubles. It will be helpful to the young men and women who are lost today by helping them to rediscover nature and reason. I was privileged to know and teach Charlie Kirk. His widow Erika read from his journals at his memorial service. Much of what she read were notes on an Aristotle class. Studying the classics, he learned to appreciate the

fact that things are real: two plus two does in fact equal four, in all cases and always. Men are not to be ridden as horses because they are not the same thing. The Declaration of Independence, like the classic authors, teaches that things are real. Charlie was inspiring because he was able to show that to millions of young men and women and to help them find their way. Nick Fuentes has called himself the alt-Charlie. He is rather the anti-Charlie. He lives in unreality.

In our college right now is a young man by the name of Luke who has started an organization named after the 12th Legion Fulminate of ancient Rome. The Emperor Licinius put members of the 12th Legion in freezing water to die unless they would renounce Christianity. In commemoration of that, Luke and the members of his group go to our local lake in freezing weather before the sun rises and stand in the water singing hymns and reciting Bible passages. This is a very young-mannish thing to do, but what do they learn from it? To serve. To be strong. To be free. To look up. These are the kind of young Americans who will save our country.

The oldest building on Hillsdale's campus was dedicated on the Fourth of July in 1853. Many of the young men who attended that dedication would serve in the Civil War. Their numbers surpassed any non-military college excepting Yale. Four of them would be awarded the Medal of Honor. Why did they go? They believed in freedom because they believed that things are real.

At Hillsdale next year, we will carry on teaching here on campus, with intensity and purpose, that things are real. We will teach it as well to increasing millions of people through our online courses. We will teach it in our K-12 charter schools, which number close to 100 with thousands using our curriculum, all for free. We will teach it to anyone who will listen and wishes to learn.

And we will celebrate the Declaration of Independence on its 250th anniversary, as we have always done, wholeheartedly and with a full throat. As it founded our country, so today it can save it.