

## America and the Natural Rights of Man

When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” it was quite the revolutionary notion. At the time, you could not just assume that all men were created equal. In Europe, most countries were monarchies, where it was common knowledge that all people were not created equal but that kings were superior, and after that nobles and clergy, and after that peasants (otherwise known today as “us”). The idea that all men were equal had begun to be propagated by a few liberal French and British philosophers who, though they were members of the elite, were tired of nobles exploiting the poor. People like Voltaire, Baron Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke dreamed of a political system in which people were measured by their personal worth, not who their parents were. America’s founding fathers, particularly people like Jefferson, James Madison, Ben Franklin, and John Adams, were fans of this philosophical movement, which acquired the name the “natural rights of man.” When they crafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, it was their explicit goal to try and create a nation steeped in this new exciting moral philosophy of equality. Except for one thing: Slavery.

It’s not as if the Founders were unaware of the contradiction. Even during the colonial era, the early founders argued over the role slavery would play in America. John Adams and his wife famously refused to buy slaves and passed that on to his son and our country’s sixth president, John Quincy. Others, however, were reluctant to abandon the economic system that had made them able to compete with Britain in the first place. And they knew that the Southern colonies would never join the Union if they made slavery illegal. Here is an excerpt from Thomas Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration, which addressed King George: *“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere . . . Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce”* If you’re reeling at the irony of Jefferson writing this despite the fact that he himself was a slaveowner, you’re not alone. Jefferson was . . . complicated. Franklin asked him to take this section out because he knew the Southern colonies would never agree to it, and he did.

But leaving the idea of all men being created equal in the Declaration was still enough of an Easter egg for blacks in America to latch on to. Almost immediately, black leaders began to clamor for their access to “natural rights.” This all exploded into reality in 1791 when Toussaint L’Ouverture led a black-slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (today’s Haiti) and actually overthrew its gov’t using the argument of natural rights as his justification. For the first time, a slave rebellion had succeeded in defeating its oppressors, and now a black-led Haiti would be seeking its place in the community of nations. This event just a few miles off the coast of Florida terrified slaveowners, who feared that as soon as blacks heard about this concept of natural rights, they would try to acquire theirs—violently, if necessary. Slave-rebellion leaders up and down the Western hemisphere continued using natural rights as justification for why slavery should be abolished. Eventually, the community of

nations could no longer argue for slavery with any moral compunction. Either all men were *not* created equal, or slaves were not men. As these fears heightened, the slave complex in the South got more and more oppressive and strict, and Southern states became more and more protective of their right to own slaves. This despite the fact that most countries in the world who considered themselves “enlightened” began abolishing the practice left and right. But the American South went the other way, and continued all the way up until the election of the vehemently antislavery president Abraham Lincoln, at which point they seceded. But America’s founding documents were actually crafted with these contradictions sewn into their fabric. Fortunately, they were designed so that later generations could amend them, to the benefit of all mankind.