

Special Issue: The 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

Sacred Honor: Rhetoric with Consequences

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1. A Living Declaration

On July 4, 2004, I stood in the blazing sun among forty people at the Union Square flagpole in New York City, participating in a public reading of the Declaration of Independence. The site features the document's words engraved in metal—fixed, permanent, and reverential. That day, the Declaration felt like a historical artifact transformed into a living act.

I continue to lead these readings each July 4th. Since the pandemic, they have moved online. Participants from around the world—India, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, and China—take turns reading it aloud, one paragraph at a time. In one instance, we held a dedicated reading with Chinese dissidents.

They had different accents and different political realities, but spoke the same words. Some participants read with confidence, others with hesitation. A few spoke with the careful precision of someone aware that, in another place, these words might carry negative consequences.

We always conclude the same way: by reading the names of the signers. Verbally acknowledging those who pledged their “lives ...

fortunes ... and sacred honor.”¹ There is a noticeable shift when those names are spoken because whatever else the Declaration is, it is a statement of ideas backed by consequence.

2. From Framework to Analysis

The title of this essay invites a question: What kind of rhetoric carries consequences? Aristotle, whose work influenced the founders, offers a clear starting point. In his work on the subject, he states: “Let rhetoric, then, be a power of seeing what is capable of being persuasive on each subject.”² Aristotle identified three modes of persuasion: ethos (character), logos (reason), and pathos (emotion). These are often treated as techniques of effective communication. Properly understood, they describe something more demanding: the conditions under which words carry consequences.

In studying great historical speeches, I have found this framework indispensable for understanding why certain words endure. It is an approach I develop in my book *Voices of Reason: Lessons for Liberty’s Leaders* where I analyze enduring speeches through this same lens of moral alignment.³ The Declaration of Independence, the founding statement of American political principles and the justification for independence, is no exception. If its ethos is found in “sacred honor,” its logos and pathos reveal how that moral commitment is argued and felt.

3. Ethos: “Sacred Honor” and Moral Credibility

Ethos refers to the credibility of the speaker; it’s credibility grounded in moral character. The signers did not present themselves as detached theorists; by signing, they pledged their “sacred honor.” They bound their argument to their own fates. They did not sign to be heard,

¹ Richard D. Hefner, *A Documentary History of the United States* (Penguin Books, 1952), p. 18.

² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *Plato and Aristotle, Gorgias and Rhetoric*, trans. and ed. Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing, 2009), p. 137.

³ Robert Begley, *Voices of Reason: Lessons for Liberty’s Leaders* (Indie Books International, 2025), p. 34.

except perhaps John Hancock, with his overly large lettering. *They signed to be held accountable.*

To affix one's name to the Declaration was to assume real danger. As recounted in the essay, "The Price They Paid,"⁴ many signers suffered loss of property, imprisonment, or worse in the cause of independence. Their pledge of "lives ... fortunes ... and sacred honor" was not pompous posturing.⁵ It was a statement of personal liability.

Consider three figures associated with that pledge:

George Walton, future Georgia governor, was wounded in battle and captured by the British. He risked his *life* in the cause of independence.

Robert Morris, principal financier of the Revolution, used his personal credit to secure supplies and sustain the war effort. He risked his *fortune*, at great personal cost.

Benjamin Franklin, the most internationally recognized and esteemed American of his time, risked his *sacred honor*, fully aware that failure would mean disgrace or death.

Without this pledge, the Declaration reads as an argument. With it, the Declaration becomes a commitment.

4. Logos: The Structure of Justification

Logos refers to the use of reason and structured argument. The Declaration unfolds with precision:

- A statement of principles: equality and unalienable, individual rights.

⁴ E. Brooke Harlowe, "The Price They Paid," The Connecticut Society of the Sons of The American Revolution (n.d.), <https://www.sarconnecticut.org/the-price-they-paid/#:~:text=Have%20you%20ever%20wondered%20what,debts%2C%20and%20died%20in%20rags.>

⁵ Hefner, *A Documentary History of the United States*, p. 18.

- A theory of government: consent of the governed.
- A conditional right of revolution.
- A list of grievances as evidence.

This is not a protest. It is a case. The Declaration reads less like a burst of revolutionary enthusiasm and more like a legal brief, but with far higher stakes.

The influence of Enlightenment thought is evident, particularly John Locke's account of natural rights in the "preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property."⁶ Government exists to secure rights; when it fails, it loses its claim to obedience.

The Declaration first asserts independence and then justifies it. That distinction matters. Its reasoning invites scrutiny and does not avoid it. Even critics must engage with the structure of the argument.

5. Pathos: The Experience of Injustice

Pathos refers to the appeal to human emotion and moral experience. The grievances are structured to build force. The repeated phrase "He has..." creates rhythm, pattern, and escalation.

The reader is not simply informed of injustice. The reader is made to feel it. This adds moral clarity. To recognize injustice requires more than understanding. It requires experiencing its weight. The Declaration appeals to a universal human concern: the desire to be treated with dignity rather than subjected to arbitrary power.

This helps explain its reach beyond its original context. Participants in global readings do not need to share the founders' circumstances to grasp the emotional logic of the text. They recognize the feeling based on their own experiences with injustice.

⁶ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed C. B. Macpherson, (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980), p. 66.

6. Integration: A Unified Moral Argument

The Declaration's enduring power lies in the integration of ethos, logos, and pathos:

- **Ethos** gives the argument credibility.
- **Logos** gives it structure.
- **Pathos** gives it urgency.

Together, they produce something rare: A moral argument people are willing to act on. Remove logos, and the document becomes sentiment. Remove pathos, and it becomes abstract. Remove ethos, and it loses credibility.

This alignment gives speech its highest purpose. It does more than express ideas. It binds them to action. The Declaration is persuasive, but it is also an alignment of belief and action.

7. A Continuing Challenge

The Declaration does more than justify independence in 1776. It sets a standard. The signers did not separate belief from action. They tied their principles to their reputations, their futures, and their survival. They made their words accountable. This raises a deeper question: What does it mean to speak responsibly about liberty?

If moral clarity requires alignment between belief and action, then the standard set by the Declaration is demanding. The strength of an argument is measured by logic and also by what one is willing to risk in defending it. We can say that "Sacred Honor" is not simply a phrase. It is a test.

8. Conclusion: Words That Bind

Modern readers often treat the Declaration as a statement of ideals. The founders treated it as a commitment. The document endures not only because it is eloquent and philosophically grounded, but

because it represents something far more demanding: *rhetoric with consequences*.

The question, then, is whether we agree with the Declaration. In an age increasingly shaped by collectivist frameworks, where individuals are often reduced to categories of race, gender, or some kind of group identity, the Declaration's insistence on individual rights and moral agency remains both radical and necessary.

The question is whether we will uphold those principles as individuals. Are we willing to speak with clarity, conviction, and moral courage? I have tried, in my own way, to keep these words alive by reading them each year. The question is whether we as a nation at 250 will carry them forward with the sacred honor that those who signed it demanded of themselves.