

## **The American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Greek Proclamation of the Messenian Senate (1821)**

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There are many excellent works on the sentiment of Americans in support of the Greek War of Independence (1821 - 1830) as well as the Americans who fought for a Greece to become independent from the Ottoman Empire. This essay analyzes the political concept of insurrections which is composed of two related but distinct sub-concepts: revolutions and wars of independence. Revolutions aspire to reform or re-order the existing sovereign entity and society based on philosophical ideals. Wars of independence aspire to separate a self-identified ethnic/religious group of people from an existing sovereign and establish a self-governing nation state also based on philosophical ideals. The result of a successful revolution and war of independence is a self-governing nation state. Nationalism influences the historical and political evolution of that nation state. The United States emerged in 1783 from the American Revolution which was more than 38 years before the traditional start of the Greek War of Independence on a continent more than 3,000 miles away. Because it was remote in time and space, the American Revolution did not directly influence the Greek War of Independence. However, each of their respective elites was highly influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment. The common and differing ideological dynamics of the American Revolution and the Greek War of Independence are expressed in their founding documents.

### **Insurrections in Perspective**

Insurrections have driven the ebbs and flows of history since time immemorial. Beginning in the Renaissance, insurrections have taken two basic forms: revolutions and wars of independence. The terms "revolution" and war of independence are often used as synonyms. But they differ in concept. The fundamental ideology of a revolution is an

abstract of philosophical ideals. The object is to replace the existing governing regime and to re-organize society according to a philosophical ideal, usually equality. The revolution eliminates class and privilege. Each person a *right* to essentials such as food, clothing and shelter and the *right* to

enjoy the fruits of his or her personal efforts. The source of these rights is the law of nature. The revolutionary elite is expected to organize society so that these rights function and create a governing regime to secure these rights. The British Civil War (1642-1651), the French Revolution of 1791 and the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe were revolutions in this sense.

In contrast, the object of a war of independence is not to replace or reform the governing regime but to separate from it. As a result of a successful war of independence, the elite creates a nation state within the meaning of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 which the community of nations recognizes as a member of and a participant in the international order. The fundamental ideology is to re-establish a political and social construct which existed in the fog of a mythological past and has become a shared memory among the people. The elites institute a governing regime which is less about philosophical abstractions such as equality and more about protecting and preserving the state. Whether the structure of the governing regime is democratic or autocratic or something in between is secondary to protecting and preserving the state. The wars of the Spanish colonies against Spain in South America in the 1820s and the Irish Risings of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Concept of Nationalism**

Whether an insurrection is a revolution or a war for independence, nationalism is an element. The issue is the degree to which nationalism influences the insurrection. For decades, academics, historians and political scientists have attempted to define nationalism. They recognize that nationalism, as a concept, is a force in politics, international relations and history. There is a general consensus as to the concept of nationalism in the sense it that "I know it when I see it." But nationalism defies a hard definition. It is a force which acts in a particular manner depending on and subject to the historical and political contexts in which it functions.

Nevertheless, there are certain principles of which the concept of nationalism is composed and which are common to all forms of nationalism. There must be a group of people who live in an identified geographical area, speak a common language or dialect, adhere to a common belief system which derives from some past myth or mythological figure and becomes a shared memory which is unique to the people.

Within the context of revolutions and wars of independence, the shared memory

is based on religious emotion or irrational reverence for the myth or mythical figure. Whether the myth is historically accurate or the mythological figure ever existed is irrelevant. All that matters is that the shared memory must inspire men and women to die to achieve the purposes of the revolution or independence. Also, even after these purposes are achieved, the shared memory is reinterpreted so as to inspire people to act to protect and perpetuate the new order or new nation. Such inspiration derives from threats which the new regime identifies as being from internal traitors or external enemies.

### **The Influence of the Age of Enlightenment**

The Enlightenment (17<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century) was an intellectual movement composed of political philosophy and science and based on logic and reason. It was inspired by the revival of interest in classical antiquity which had developed during the Renaissance. It originated in Europe and migrated to the British colonies in North America and, ultimately, the United States. The concept of the Enlightenment is embodied in the axiom of Rene Descartes, "I think, therefore I am" and the axiom of Immanuel Kant "Dare to know". The Enlightenment questioned the medieval notions of religion, society and political order. The political philosophy stressed the primacy of the individual and the natural rights of the individual in society. The Enlightenment fundamentally challenged a political and social edifice which had existed for more than 1,000 years. As a consequence, it spawned turmoil and extremism as well as "light."

The primary expositors of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Each of them posited that before organized societies were formed, human beings existed in a state of nature of absolute liberty without a government or laws. Human beings came to be dissatisfied with this state of nature such that they surrendered varying degrees of their liberty to a sovereign. In exchange, the sovereign would organize a society so that they could prosper and be protected, the social contract. Hobbes believed that, in this state of nature, human beings lived in chaos because they were evil and hostile. They surrendered their liberty to a sovereign who they empowered to promulgate laws to control society. Locke believed that in the state of nature human beings were good and had the capacity to cooperate. To prosper and enjoy their liberty, they created a sovereign who they select through the method of representative democracy. In exchange for the protection of life, liberty and property, they surrender a measure of their liberty to the sovereign. Rousseau essentially accepted the same premise as did Locke. But he disagreed with representative democracy as the organizing principle of government. Rousseau believed that the people should be sovereign and, to the greatest extent practical, directly make the laws.

## The Historical Context of the Declaration of Independence

The historical context of an insurrection shapes the ideology on which the insurrection is based. We could say that the American Revolution (1776-1783) began the day after King William III and Queen Mary II ascended the English throne in 1688 in the Glorious Revolution. The Americans were Englishmen and subjects of the monarchy. They were entitled to rights set forth in the Bill of Rights 1689 and related legislation. But most of the colonies were ruled by governors who the Crown appointed and the Americans had no representation in Parliament.

The Americans of the American Revolution did not seek to establish a nation state because they were a nationalist people separate from England. Rather, they were Englishmen to whom the Crown and Parliament had denied the rights of Englishmen. The most intense debates in the Philadelphia during the summer of 1776 were whether the colonies had the legal right to separate from the Crown and whether the colonies should reform and re-negotiate their relations with the Crown and Parliament. The revolutionary elite concluded in the Declaration of Independence that these rights could only be secured by a nation state which was separate from England. It is for this reason, that the US Bill of Rights of 1792 can be said to derive from the Bill of Rights 1689.

The Declaration of Independence is the most complete expression of the ideological basis of the American Revolution. The primary drafter was Thomas Jefferson. He was a lawyer, public intellectual, diplomat, statesman, mediocre plantation owner and a slaveholder. **Contemporary Americans hold the text of the Declaration in high reverence.** Not surprisingly, it is written in the style of a complaint of the time that a lawyer would file in court. It is organized in three parts. The first part is the preamble which sets forth the purpose of the Declaration, the second part lists the injurious acts committed by the Crown and the third part sets forth the remedy for the injurious acts, the United States which is a nation state independent from the Crown and a full member of the community of nations.

The Declaration embodies Locke's theory. In the first instance, all of the people and individual persons have the right to life, liberty and, in using a term broader than property, the pursuit of happiness. These are rights which they were not given to them but which are inherent in the people by nature and which they brought into organized society. Secondly, to preserve and protect these rights the people form governments. Thirdly, if the government ceases to secure these rights the government breaches the social contract. As a consequence, the people are entitled to dispense with the breaching government and create a new one. The government breaches its obligations under the social contract so that the people have the inherent right to "alter or abolish"

the government.

There is a glaring contradiction in the Declaration. Consistent with ideology of the Enlightenment, the Declaration contains the oft quoted phrase “[A]ll men are created equal”. Jefferson as well as many other heroes of the American Revolution including George Washington owned and profited from slaves. There is evidence that they rejected the institution slavery and acknowledged the contradiction. John Adams, who represented Massachusetts at the Continental Congress in 1776 which ratified the Declaration but did not own slaves, requested that the Declaration include a provision which rejected slavery in principle. As a compromise, Jefferson proposed to add a clause to the list of injurious acts which would have accused the Crown of, in effect, perpetuating the slave trade. The compromise provision did not mention slaves or persons forcibly taken from Africa. When the final text was presented to Congress, the delegations from South Carolina and Georgia, with the tacit support of New York banking interests who profited from the cotton trade, objected and the clause was eliminated from the final text.

This contradiction was carried into the Constitution of the United States in which, for the purpose of calculating the population of each state, slaves were counted as 3/5th of a person. It was not until the end of the bloody War of Southern Secession (1861-1865) that the Constitution was amended to eliminate the legal effect of this provision.

### **The Historical Context of the Greek War of Independence**

The historical context of the Greek War of Independence was that a national group who considered themselves ethnic Greeks and Orthodox Christians was ruled by the Ottomans who were Turkic and Muslim. Traditionally, the Greeks consider their subjugation to the Ottomans to have lasted 400 years beginning in 1453 with the fall of Constantinople to Sultan Mehmed II. Over this period of time, the terms of the subjugation varied in time and place. In the southern Peloponnese the Greeks exercised a fair measure of local autonomy. Under the millet system of the Ottoman Empire, the Orthodox Church was organized so that its prelates exercised spiritual and legal authority over the Christian populations within the millet. Also, by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Greeks as well as other Christians and Jews held high positions in the Ottoman bureaucracy. But, ultimately, whatever benefits the Sultan bestowed on the Greeks, the Sultan could take them away at his pleasure at any time. The Greeks were not in any way lawfully entitled to the rights and privileges of Muslims.

Traditionally, the progenitors of the War were an individual named Rigas Ferraios and a group called the *Philiki Eteria* (Society of Friends). Rigas was a teacher in a village in northern Greece who migrated to Europe. He lived mainly in Vienna. He lived among the prosperous Greek merchants who had emigrated from the urban Greek

communities within the Ottoman Empire. Influenced by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Rigas wrote nationalist poetry, pamphlets and a constitution for the Greek state. His concept was a state in which Greeks predominated but in which all Orthodox Christians of Ottoman Empire could find a home. Rigas was executed as a subversive in 1798. His writings had limited influence in the Greek War of Independence. In the years after the Greek state was established, he was recognized as a proto martyr and his writings were revived. The opposition to the Greek junta (1966-1974) celebrated Rigas as a symbol of its cause.

The *Philiki Eteria* was founded in 1814 in Odessa by Emmanuel Xanthos, Nicholas Skoufas and Athanasios Tsakalof with purpose of establishing a Greek state independent from the Ottoman Empire. They were expatriate Greek businessmen who sought their fortunes in Russia and Europe but whose mercantile success was mediocre. It operated as a secret society based on Freemason principles similar to the Committees of Correspondence which preceded the American Revolution. Although they were influenced by the Enlightenment and French Revolution, they were primarily concerned with creating an organization the members of which would be notable personalities to lead the War. Historians disagree on the actual legacy of the *Philiki Eteria*. However, like Rigas, in the years after the Greek state was established, the *Philiki Eteria* and its founders came to be celebrated in Greece. It is memorialized by a fashionable square in Athens which is commonly known as Kolonaki Square but the formal name of which is Philiki Eteria Square. Nearby streets are named after the founders.

### **The Messenian Senate of Kalamata**

Any insurrection must be seen to have had a heroic beginning. The military phase of the War began at about the same time in 1821 in the Danubian provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia and in the southern Peloponnese. The Danubian phase was led by two ethnic Greek brothers, Dimitrios and Alexandros Ypsilanti, who were officers in the Russian Army. The Danubian phase essentially fizzled. The Peloponnesian military phase was initially quite successful. For this reason and, most likely in retrospect, the traditional beginning of the War is March 25, 1821. This is the date on which the Archbishop Germanos raised the Greek flag at the monastery of Agia Lavra in the northwestern Peloponnese and declared "Freedom or death, brothers".

Similarly, the battles at Lexington and Concord in 1775 are the traditional beginning of the American Revolution. The battles of Lexington and Concord are better documented than Agia Lavra. But whatever actually occurred, they served the same purpose. They provided a memory over which later historians, authors and poets could draw a heroic gloss.

Petrobey Mavromihalis was a primate whose family had ruled over portions of the southern Peloponnese without much interference from the Sultan. He led the Peloponnesian military phase of the War. As a result of the military success, several Greek national assemblies were formed to pursue the War. Mavromihalis formed and presided over the Messenian Senate of Kalamata. The Messenian Senate tasked Adamantios Korais, the scholar and Greek nationalist who lived in Paris, with soliciting support for the Greek cause from philhellenes in Europe and the United States. The Proclamation of the Messenian Senate

The Messenian Senate issued a proclamation signed by Mavromihalis that had several authors and translators. Korais sent the Proclamation to the prominent philhellene Edward Everett in Boston. Everett was a classical scholar who read ancient Greek, a public intellectual, statesman, and, most important, a publisher. Everett published the Proclamation in his influential *North American Review*. It was the text and the fact of its publication that spawned the exhortations for the Greek cause in the American press and the committees throughout the United States to aid the Greek people. The Proclamation was not written by lawyers so that the text of it is not organized as an 18<sup>th</sup> century legal complaint as is the Declaration. Instead, it expresses political and philosophical ideals through poetry. It has an almost a Homeric tone similar to the tone of the English translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Two general observations about the Proclamation: It does not mention the establishment of a Greek state and it does not mention the type of aid which the Greeks sought from the Americans. The Proclamation is analyzed below with the text in italics and the commentary in common text:

*To the citizens of the United States of America.*

*Having formed the resolution to live or die for freedom, we are drawn toward you by a just sympathy; since it is in your land that Liberty has fixed her abode, and by you that she is prized as by our fathers.*

The Proclamation addresses to the citizens of the United States of American. It is not addressed to the government, any official, any notable person, or even the American press. The authors use the term Liberty without qualification. They assume it to be a natural state as posited by Locke. They do not define Liberty nor do they not question the legal or political source of Liberty. Implicit in how they use the term Liberty is that the substance and function of it is obvious to all people.

The authors assert that the Liberty which the US citizens attained was inspired by, in effect, the ancient Greeks. Therefore, the cause of Liberty comes full circle back to the descendants of the ancient Greeks.



*Though separated from you by mighty oceans, your character brings you near us. We esteem you nearer than the nations on our frontiers; and we possess, in you, friends, fellow-citizens, and brethren, because you are just, humane and generous; –just because free, generous and liberal because christian.*

The Proclamation was issued at about the same time as was the Monroe Doctrine and the insurrections in South America. This was a time when Americans considered themselves morally removed from the Europeans because the European powers were colonial empires. In contrast, the Americans had created a republic. The Greeks assert that they are morally the same as the Americans because they also aspire to create a republic.

This passage appears to echo the views of the American editors of the Proclamation rather than views of Mavromihalis and the members of the Messenian Senate. However, it may also reflect a trait familiar in Greek society that, before a Greek enters into a relationship with someone else, it is necessary that the parties find some fact or occurrence which is common to them. The common fact in the Proclamation is that the American citizens and the Greeks have the same moral character.

*Your liberty is not propped on the slavery of other nations, nor your prosperity on their calamities and sufferings. But, on the contrary, free and prosperous yourselves, you are desirous that all men should share the same blessings; that all should enjoy these rights, to which all are by nature equally entitled. It is you, who first proclaimed these rights; it is you who have been the first again to recognize them, in rendering the rank of men to the Africans degraded to the level of brutes. It is by your example, that Europe has abolished the shameful and cruel trade in human flesh, from you that she receives lessons in justice, and learns to renounce her absurd and sanguinary customs. This glory, Americans is yours alone, and raises you above all the nations which have gained a name for liberty and laws.*

This passage is most certainly the work of the American editors and probably Korais. It is almost the literal text of the pamphlets and speeches of the nascent abolitionist movement in New England. The rhetoric reflects the sentiment that the Greeks are oppressed. However, the condition of their oppression does not compare to the institution of slavery. The Greeks were not forcibly taken from their homelands, transported in unspeakable conditions thousands of miles away, turned into a commodity which was bought and sold and bound to a slave owner who had the power of life and death over the slave.

*It is for you, citizens of America, to crown this glory, in aiding us to purge Greece from the barbarians, who for four hundred years have polluted the soil. It is surely worthy of you to repay the obligations of the civilized nations, and to banish ignorance and*



*barbarism from the country of freedom and the arts. You will not assuredly imitate the culpable indifference or rather the long ingratitude of some of the Europeans.*

In any insurrection even in any war, the oppressed must describe their oppressor as evil doer who viciously suppresses the morals and norms of civilization. The authors do name the Ottomans. They describe the force against which they rise only as "barbarians". This reflects a sentiment that it does not matter who the barbarians are but only that they be "purged" from Greece. Again, it criticizes the Europeans and assumes that the Americans will not act like Europeans. The interesting phrase is the "...long ingratitude of the Europeans." This expresses the idea that both the Americans and the Europeans owe a debt to the Greeks for the wisdom and art which ancestors of the ancient Greeks bestowed on them.

*No, the fellow-citizens of Penn, of Washington, and of Franklin, will not refuse their aid to the descendants of Phocion, and Thrasybulus, of Aratus, and of Philopoemen. You have already shown them esteem and confidence in sending your children to their schools. You know with what pleasure they were welcomed, and the steady kindness and attention which they received.*

This passage draws the direct connection between the heroes of the American Revolution and the ancient Greeks. It stresses the advantages of a classical education which the Americans have derived. Modern readers may have expected that the authors would have chosen more familiar ancient Greeks such as Plato, Aristotle and the poets. The average Greek villager knew little about the ancient Greeks. Some commentators have observed that the word "Hellene" would have been either unknown to a Greek villager or considered an insult. Again, it is not clear how much Mavromihalis and the members the Messenian Senate knew about the ancient Greeks.

Phocis was a city state whose soldiers were present at the Battle of Thermopylae. Fought in 480 BC, the Battle is significant for the stand of the 300 Spartans against an immense army of Persians. Although the Phocians were present at the Battle, they withdrew and sealed the fate of the Spartans. They confronted the Persians at a later date and reportedly they honorably acquitted themselves.

Thrasybulos was an Athenian general. He lived during the turmoil in Athens which followed the defeat of the Athenian army in the ill-conceived invasion of Syracuse (modern day Messina in Sicily). Various Greek city states sought to take advantage of the turmoil to the detriment of Athens. Thrasybolous was a fervent exponent of democracy. He was vital in the opposition to the Thirty Tyrants in Athens in 404 BC.

Aratus of Sicyon, in the northern Peloponnese, was a general. He led the Achaean League which was an alliance of weak city states which banded together to fight for their freedom. It is possible that some of the Messinians in the Senate were aware that Aratus and the Achaean League put up a brave but futile defense of ancient

Messenia in 221 BC.

Philopoemen of Megalopolis was a general and also led the Achaean League during the time of Aratus. He was a dedicated democrat and was called the "last of the Greeks" by a Roman author. Like Aratus, he fought to defend Messinia.

It not possible to know for sure why the authors chose these generals. They have in common that they believed in democracy and liberty and were soldiers who fought for these ideals. The American authors may have advised that the Proclamation draw a connection between George Washington the general and Benjamin Franklin, the wise man in the sense of Nestor of the Iliad. The reference to William Penn may reflect the prominence in which the abolitionists and transcendentalists held the Quaker faith.

*If such has been their conduct when enslaved; what friendship and zeal will they not manifest to you, when through your aid they shall have broken their chains. Greece will then furnish you advantages, which you can in vain seek from her ignorant and cruel tyrants; and the bonds of gratitude and fraternity will forever unite the Greeks and the Americans. Our interests are of a nature more and more to cement an alliance founded on freedom and virtue.*

This passage is an offer based on political realism but disguised as poetry. Mavromihalis and the members most certainly understood its efficacy and importance. The Greeks were both merchants and practical politicians. They knew that aid would be forthcoming only in exchange for an item of value. The only item which the Greeks could offer at the time was a promise of an alignment of political interests with the Americans. The Proclamation is an appeal based on fundamental principles. But it can be also interpreted as an offer of a deal for aid even though the type of aid is not specified.

## **Conclusion**

The Declaration of Independence expresses the grievance of a segment of a body politic from which the sovereign has withdrawn the natural rights to which the full body politic is entitled. The people of this segment can only restore these rights by separating from the sovereign and establish an independent political entity. The Proclamation of the Messenian Senate does not express a grievance. It expresses the plight of a people who are oppressed. They are denied their natural rights and excluded *ab initio* from the body politic because they practice a religion and possess an ethnicity which differs from and is at odds with the sovereign. The solution in each instance is the same. The aggrieved people and the oppressed people can only attain their natural rights through an independent entity in which they are sovereign.

The Greeks fought and endured the War from 1821 to 1830. Although most of the philhellenes who actually fought in the War came from European countries, George Jarvis, William Washington, Samuel Gridley Howe and some other Americans went to Greece and fought for the Greek cause. However, American Philhellenes supported the cause primarily by disseminating the facts and purpose of the Greek cause to Americans through the American press, raising funds for humanitarian aid and lobbying the government for official action.

Although there was strong support for the Greek cause in Congress, the Proclamation did not inspire any official action. President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams were personally sympathetic to the Greek cause. However, as a matter of official policy, they implemented a policy of neutrality in the War. Commentators disagree as to the reasons.

One reason is the policy of the Monroe Administration. This policy, which was expressed in the Monroe Doctrine, held that the United States would prevent European powers from interfering in the formation of independent republics in their colonies in the Western Hemisphere. As diplomatic matter, according official recognition to the Greek cause or dispatching military assistance would undermine the Monroe Doctrine. Another reason is that Adams was negotiating trade and commerce agreements with the Sultan. These agreements were important to New England and New York merchants who, in turn, were important to the presidential aspiration of Adams. Official support for the Greek cause would endanger these negotiations.

Shortly after the Greek state was established, Haiti was the first nation to recognize the Greek state. The United States did not recognize the Greek state until 1838.

The legacy of the Proclamation is that it inspired fervent expressions of support for the Greek cause among the American people. It came to be referred to as "Greek fire" or "Greek fever." In modern terms, the Greek cause went viral.

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