

How the Declaration of Independence was Unoriginal

The opening of the *Declaration of Independence*, the document that formally kicked off the American Colonies' drive to establish an independent country from Great Britain, is a beloved document for most Americans. We should all know it by heart, but if one doesn't, here it is:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold 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...

Thomas Jefferson was the main author of that beautiful document which so eloquently and romantically put forth the cause of American rebels and patriots. But he was not the originator of much of the language and the ideas behind it. Much credit for all of that goes to John Locke, an English philosopher who published *Second Treatise of Government* in 1690, nearly 100 years prior to the *Declaration of Independence*.

It was in that document that Locke shared his views on the various states of man and his natural rights. He opens the second chapter in such a way that it would be hard to not

notice how much the *Declaration* mimics the thinking and language of Locke.

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

...

*But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. **The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions:** for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure: and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for our's. Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or*

what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

When you compare crucial parts of the two documents (and there are other comparisons to be made, but we will not do so here), it becomes clear how much Locke's writing and ideas influenced the *Declaration of Independence*. Consider the comparison below:

John Locke: "The *state of nature* has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all *equal and independent*, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker..."

Declaration of Independence: "We hold 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."

While Jefferson may have pulled much of the thinking and ideas from Locke, it is probably safe to say that Locke's ideas needed the refinement of an expert marketer. Indeed, it's doubtful that Locke's words would have inspired a nation to battle for its independence and further captivated the imagination of that nation hundreds of years later as Jefferson's writing did and continue to do so today. The 'pursuit of happiness' has a much better ring to it than 'property'.