

The Ghost of Erasure: The Redacted Slavery Clause in the Declaration of Independence, 1776-1863

Elaine Zou
ezou2019@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Rather than the unquestionable charter of freedom it is often characterized as, the Declaration of Independence is a contingent political document that underwent multiple rounds of revisions before ratification. Using comparative textual and reception-history analysis, my paper examines why Congress removed Jefferson's denunciation of the transatlantic slave-trade and how that editorial decision created interpretive ambiguity in later antislavery movements. Redacting the slave-trade clause may have ensured unity in the short run and mitigated regional conflict, but retaining the broad natural-rights language gave later reformers justification for abolition. Congress's strategic decision delayed conflict for the future nation to face, placing interpretive power in the hands of Frederick Douglass who demanded abolition and John C. Calhoun and later the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision who leveraged the created ambiguity to preserve racial inequality. Before public exposure, political documents undergo extensive revision akin to that of the Declaration, revealing drafting and revision processes to be as important as final products. The crucial clause which may have reshaped the trajectory of our nation and the Civil War if preserved highlights the importance of investigating deletions and processes as much as preserved final products. Re-examining the changes made from conception to adoption sheds light on valuable perspectives and nuances to challenge previously held assumptions of the Declaration of Independence as a self-evident, immutable, and canonical text.

INTRODUCTION

"He has waged cruel War against human Nature itself, violating its most sacred Rights of Life and Liberty in the Persons of a distant People...captivating and carrying them into Slavery in another Hemisphere." Unbeknownst to many, this fierce critique of King George III and the British Empire's participation in the transatlantic slave-trade came from an original draft of the Declaration of Independence penned by Thomas Jefferson. Today, the Declaration, adopted by the Second Continental Congress in 1776, lives in the memory of Americans as the foundational document spelling out American liberties. This narrative, however, overshadows its nature as a negotiated piece of political propaganda that underwent substantial modifications aimed at softening its language of liberty before its finalization, including this erasure of Thomas Jefferson's denunciation of the transatlantic slave-trade and rephrasing of 'sacred and

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undeniable' truths to be 'self-evident.'¹ If the Continental Congress maintained that "all men are created equal," why did they erase Jefferson's condemnation of slavery, which embodied the same principle?² In this essay, I argue that Congress deliberately altered the Declaration's language to reconcile the American Creed with political unity, thereby compromising the American Revolution's commitment to universal natural rights. As historian Garry Wills has argued, the Declaration's foundational appeal lies in its philosophical claims of equality rather than legal enforceability, revealing the document's role in establishing malleable standards both founders and reformers could later leverage.³ My paper highlights how by redacting Jefferson's slave clauses while preserving natural-rights language, the Second Continental Congress created an inherently self-contradictory document whose loud silence on the humanity of African Americans would continue to haunt the American public until the eve of the Civil War.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a single-case document analysis approach, evaluating the formation, revision, redaction, and subsequent reinterpretation of the Declaration of Independence to understand how the simultaneous preservation of natural-rights language and redaction of the slave-trade clause traced across nearly a century of political conflicts. The research draws on three bodies of primary evidence with the first being the Declaration of Independence itself. A comparison of the revisions of the Declaration including Jefferson's original draft, the Committee of Five's revisions, and the final engrossed copy reveals the mechanics behind removal and presentation. Next, Thomas Jefferson's Autobiography, which had disclosed the redaction of the slave clause until 1829, testified the reality of the drafting. The final body explores the Black freedom petitions from Massachusetts in 1777 and New Hampshire in 1779, the American Anti-Slavery Society's 1833 Declaration of Sentiments, speeches of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, the proslavery arguments of Thomas Dew, John C. Calhoun, and the Dred Scott decision, and the declaration's political reception. These sources were selected against (1) the proximity to the drafting and reception of the Declaration; (2) archival credibility, and (3) relevance to the document's redaction and political afterlife.

Pairing comparative textual analysis and reception history, the paper compares drafts against one another and traces the afterlife of surviving language and meaning. By treating the document as a contested and interpretable text, the paper investigates meaning from revisions and redactions in their own right rather than limiting analysis of the adopted Declaration. Any account of why Congress ultimately redacted the slave clause however, faces an evidentiary constraint in that no formal explanation exists explaining the

¹ "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, November 1, 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

² National Archives, "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription."

³ Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, 1st Mariner Books ed (Houghton Mifflin Co, 2002), 94.

deletion. The motive the paper focuses on, that Congress sacrificed the clause to preserve greater union rests on triangulation from existing data— Jefferson’s claim that the passage was "struck out in complaisance to South Carolina & Georgia," America’s economic dependence on the southern economy, and the efforts by Congress to soften declaration language. Though alternative motives cannot be excluded, the impact of the loud absence of the redacted slave clause regardless prompts reconsideration of the Declaration’s values, purposes, and legacy.

RESULTS: HISTORICAL FINDINGS

The Revolutionary Promise

Historians debate whether the American Revolution hinged on a yearning for “natural rights,” English liberties, or a mixture of the two.⁴ Regardless of freedom’s specific meaning, patriots believed they fought on freedom’s side.⁵ No document captured and legitimized this belief more powerfully than the Declaration of Independence. From its conception, the Declaration served to justify separation from the British Empire by condemning its despotic policies while elucidating the idea of intrinsic human rights.⁶ Taking inspiration from John Locke’s social contract, the Declaration declared revolution a necessity when a “long train of abuses and usurpations... evinces a design to reduce [a people] under absolute Despotism.”⁷ In hindsight, this revolutionary logic fostered a permanent moral standard that would repeatedly repel subsequent attempts to revoke or limit freedom’s bounds. Historian David Brion Davis argues that the American Revolution inspired a new idea of natural rights contradicting the continuation of slavery, rivaling economic interests.⁸ Even with the removal of the slave-trade clause, the Declaration of Independence’s promises of self-determination invariably carved out space for subsequent slavery debates in American politics. In other words, a true revolution would take place not on the battlefield but in the public sphere, as later generations reacted to the Declaration’s ideals and sought to reform American law and society to match them.

Drafting and Deletion of the Slave-Trade Passage

⁴ “The Role of Natural Law in the American Revolution,” *Harvard Law Review* 108, no. 5 (March 1995): 1202–1207, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341877>.

⁵ “Lee Resolution (1776),” National Archives, March 15, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/lee-resolution>.

⁶ National Archives, “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription”

⁷ National Archives, “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription”; for Locke and the social contract, see Brenée Goforth Swanzy, “How John Locke Influenced the Declaration of Independence,” *John Locke Foundation*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.johnlocke.org/john-locke-and-the-declaration-of-independence/>.

⁸ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 255–284.

The Lost Clause

A side-by-side comparison of Jefferson's original draft with Congress's revisions and the eventually engrossed copy of the Declaration of Independence reveals progression from emotive to more measured language, as seen by the redaction of emotionally charged phrases like "the last stab to agonizing affection."⁹ Since independence from Great Britain necessitated a united front, the Continental Congress tempered language that might implicate the regional slave-holding interests of Southern colonies. According to historian Pauline Maier, the Declaration and Congress' deliberate redactions spoke to their aim of garnering support and revolutionary legitimacy.¹⁰ However, redactions inadvertently modified not only diction but also meaning: several passages expressing notions of liberty disappeared altogether, including Jefferson's slave grievance, which condemned the slave-trade as "a market where Men should be bought & sold" alongside other imperial crimes.¹¹ The slave passage was written not in isolation, but to legitimize the revolutionary ethos: Jefferson appealed to "natural rights" rhetoric by declaring African Americans "men," thereby broadening the demographic scope of the Patriot ideological foundations.¹² Jefferson's draft inscribed the inextricable contradiction of slavery within the genesis of a country founded on freedom. By framing the slave-trade as a factor of Great Britain's mercantilist economy, Jefferson cast the Patriot cause as incompatible with the slave-trade's continuity, even if his words contradicted an emerging belief that slavery was growing increasingly inseparable from American economic interests.¹³

Jefferson would later write that "the clause... was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina & Georgia," a reminder that preserving unanimity required appeasing delegates from slave-dependent colonies.¹⁴ By 1776, slavery underpinned these regions' economies, with enslaved people comprising nearly half of Georgia's population and a similarly large proportion in South Carolina, highlighting Congress's ultimate dependency on perpetuating the institution to sustain Revolutionary unity.¹⁵ This deletion reveals that while slavery was actively considered in drafting of the Declaration of Independence, political and economic interests triumphed for the time being. Avoiding confrontations over slavery in the

⁹ "The Declaration of Independence: Compare Versions," accessed January 19, 2026, <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/compare.html>.

¹⁰ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 97–105.

¹¹ "The Declaration of Independence: Compare Versions."

¹² "The Declaration of Independence: Compare Versions."

¹³ Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, vol. 4, *The Border Colonies and the Southern Colonies* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1935), v, https://archive.org/details/documentsillustr00donn_2.

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," January 6, 1821, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed January 25, 2026, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jeffauto.asp.

¹⁵ "Slavery in Antebellum Georgia," New Georgia Encyclopedia, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/>.

expanding American economy would further entrench concerns on opposing sides of the slavery debate, foreshadowing the powerful reactions and future reform efforts that the Revolution's unresolved promises of equality would provoke.

Political Considerations in Congress

Congressional Reaction and Removal

From start to finish, the creation of the Declaration spanned over seventeen days and passed through the Committee of Five, selected by Congress.¹⁶ Regionally, the Committee was diverse, with two representatives from New England, two from the Middle Colonies, and one from the South.¹⁷ In practice, however, the Committee was composed of aristocratic politicians whose economic positions likely narrowed their conception of the new American nation.¹⁸ Before adopting the Declaration on the Fourth of July, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin had deleted and revised approximately one fifth of Jefferson's draft before Congress made further alterations.¹⁹ Jefferson, the Upper Southern representative, added the slave-trade grievance to the Declaration, yet members of Congress still wished to separate slavery from American liberty. With colonial unity a top priority in the face of revolution, Congress avoided potential conflict by reacting to the Committee's draft with utmost vigilance against any sectional rhetoric, especially against an institution that already provoked American division.²⁰

No complete records explaining Congress's motivations in deleting the clause exist today, thus making it difficult to determine the delegates' true intentions. A desire to maintain regional unity, assuage British criticisms, and prevent the circulation of inaccurate information were all possible motivations. Nevertheless, Congress took six full days to revise the Declaration, deliberating all sections independently.²¹ When delegates felt language was amiss, they advocated for "softening" words and meanings.²²

¹⁶ National Archives, "The Declaration of Independence: A History," last reviewed May 14, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-history>.

¹⁷ National Archives, "Declaration of Independence: A History."

¹⁸ National Archives, "Declaration of Independence: A History."

¹⁹ National Archives, "Declaration of Independence: A History."

²⁰ "Season of Independence Big Idea 7: Drafting the Declaration," accessed January 19, 2026, <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/season-of-independence-big-idea-7-drafting-the-declaration>.

²¹ "Declaration of Independence: Right to Institute New Government | Exhibitions - Library of Congress," webpage, April 24, 2000, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffdec.html>.

²² United States Continental Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, vol. 5, *June 5–October 8, 1776* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 128, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llscdam.lljc005/>.

As such, the Declaration of Independence sought not only to secure independence, but to convey a strategic public message of American independence that appealed to as broad an audience as possible. While many Americans shared a desire for freedom from Great Britain, foreigners, loyalists, and other international audiences still doubted the new nation's legitimacy.²³

Jefferson's Positionality

As historians have collectively identified, Jefferson himself was notoriously inconsistent on the issue of slavery. On the one hand, he belonged to a proslavery Virginia planter aristocracy, and personally owned over 600 people throughout his lifetime.²⁴ On the other hand, however, he began his public challenge to the institution of slavery as early as in 1769 in the Virginia House of Burgesses, and committed his critique to writing in a 1774 pamphlet.²⁵ This inconsistency most likely contributed to both his antislavery rhetoric in the original draft of the Declaration and his eventual acquiescence to the redaction processes.

Early Black Freedom Petitions

Though Jefferson's condemnation of the slave-trade was redacted from the Declaration of Independence, the emergence of natural rights claims inspired substantial appeals to American equality among advocates for rights of African Americans. In Massachusetts, African American petitioners referenced "a natural & unalienable right to that freedom... bestowed equally on all mankind" while petitioning to the government in 1777, mirroring the diction of the Declaration published the previous year.²⁶ Two years later, in New Hampshire, natural rights rhetoric reappeared in an antislavery petition.²⁷

Abolitionist Reappropriations of the Declaration

The American public, however, would only discover the fact that an original draft condemned the enslavement of African Americans over half a century after the Declaration. In 1829, three years after his death, Jefferson's grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph published Jefferson's autobiography, which made known to Americans for the first time of the redaction process that took place during the Second Continental Congress.²⁸ In a section recounting the drafting of the Declaration, Jefferson writes, "The

²³ "The Declaration of Independence: What Does It Say?," National Archives, March 24, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration/what-does-it-say>.

²⁴ "Slavery at Monticello," Monticello, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.monticello.org/slavery/slavery-faqs>.

²⁵ Jefferson, "Autobiography."

²⁶ "MHS Collections Online: Petition for Freedom (Manuscript Copy) to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives, [13] January 1777," accessed January 19, 2026, <http://www.masshist.org/database/557>.

²⁷ "1779 Petition to the New Hampshire Government (U.S. National Park Service)," accessed January 20, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/inde-1779-petition-new-hampshire-prince-whipple.htm>.

²⁸ Armin Mattes, "'The Antidotes of Truth': The First Editions of Thomas Jefferson's and James Madison's Papers," *American Political Thought* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2024), 286.

clause too, reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves.”²⁹ Here, it is possible that his narrative functioned as an attempt to absolve himself of the responsibility of condoning slavery, but the admission of a redaction process in the drafting of the Declaration did coincide with many of Jefferson’s post-revolution attempts at unraveling, however gradually, the institution of slavery.

Within Jefferson’s home state Virginia, the publication of Jefferson’s autobiography and its demonstrated antislavery attitude immediately catalyzed a heated discussion over the morality and economic utility of the “peculiar institution.” Following Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, the Virginia state legislature debated whether a law concerning the issue of slavery and the treatment of African Americans within the Old Dominion should be passed. Randolph, holding the antislavery position, was deeply influenced by his grandfather’s egalitarian stance as expressed in the original draft of the Declaration, and cited his policies as the political and ideological support for the emancipation platform.³⁰ Though the debate ended with a by-and-large preservation of the status-quo of slavery in Virginia, the influence of the redacted clauses on Randolph and other pro-emancipation legislators demonstrates how these clauses and the deletion fueled the debates around slavery in American politics in the first half of the 19th-century.³¹

In the years leading up to the American Civil War, the extensive moral reform of 19th-century America coincided with a path towards perfectionism and liberty.³² Alongside temperance, women’s rights, and educational movements supported by new communications and media technologies, abolitionism emerged as a primary antebellum reform. By the late 1830s, abolitionism was far from monolithic: the Declaration’s assertions of universal rights spread across factions, and many abolitionists soon realized the Declaration of Independence’s potential to ground their arguments on the foundation of the nation. Thus, the Declaration accelerated abolitionists’ antislavery arguments by engraving the language of liberty into the nation’s founding.

Abolitionist actions and sentiments flourished in many states, especially in the North. Not least among these was the American Anti-Slavery Society, whose 1833 Declaration of Sentiments insisted that “[N]o man has a right to enslave or imbrute his brother... The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable,” recycling language for arguments against slavery.³³ By modeling the entire document on Declaration language and

²⁹ Jefferson, “Autobiography.”

³⁰ Allison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 130-135.

³¹ Erik S. Root, “The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832,” in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Patricia Miller, <https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/entries/virginia-slavery-debate-of-1831-1832-the/>.

³² Eric Foner et al., *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, Brief seventh edition (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2023), 361.

³³ American Anti-Slavery Society, “Declaration of Sentiments” (1833), National Constitution Center, accessed January 23, 2026,

structure, the AASS framed the immediate abolition of slavery as a necessity to preserve revolutionary legitimacy, mirroring Jefferson's original slave-trade clause. As such, the AASS took advantage of pre-established American foundations to justify the immediate abolition of slavery, calling into question the violation of a ubiquitous truth of the nation. Rather than presenting a gradualist approach to emancipation, the society condemned the institution of slavery as a moral crime and pledged to "do all that in us lies... consistently with this Declaration of our principles, to overthrow the most execrable system of slavery... and to secure to the colored population of the United States, all the rights and privileges which belong to them as men."³⁴ The society's movement promised to endure well past the occasion of its formal declaration of purpose, clearly outlining its commitment to spreading the influence of Anti-Slavery Societies with concrete actions until emancipation concessions were met.³⁵

While the American Anti-Slavery Society's Declaration of Sentiments inspired a coordinated effort of resistance, abolitionists elsewhere referenced, in similar fashion, the Declaration of Independence in speeches that aimed at reaching public audiences. The day after the seventy-sixth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Frederick Douglass, in his most famous speech, posed a critical moral question to the nation, asking "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"³⁶ Departing from ambiguous references to structural similarities with the Declaration of Independence, Douglass's speech directly challenged the persistent contradiction between America's founding principles and slavery's endurance. To White Americans, the day celebrated freedom from British oppression, a revolution in honor of natural rights and liberty; by contrast, these values outlined in the Declaration of Independence were far from the reach of African Americans, who comprised one-sixth of the U.S. population.³⁷ Echoing America's founding principles, Douglass declares "justice, liberty and humanity were 'final;' not slavery and oppression," reinforcing the Declaration's promises in alignment with hopes of slavery's future abolishment.³⁸ Expounding persuasive reasoning beyond mere condemnation, Douglass maintains moral authority by exposing slavery as a betrayal of the nation's "final" assurances of natural rights. In his hands the Declaration transforms into a hallmark of American identity and abolition into the fulfillment of this identity. Holding Americans accountable to their promises, Douglass took the Declaration of Independence's unrealized values in his stride, championing "natural rights" language as pathways of hope and reform.

<https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/american-anti-slavery-society-declaration-of-sentiments-1833>

³⁴ American Anti-Slavery Society, "Declaration of Sentiments."

³⁵ American Anti-Slavery Society, "Declaration of Sentiments."

³⁶ Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 2, 1847–1854, ed. John W. Blassingame et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 359–388.

³⁷ US Census Bureau, "1850 Census: The Seventh Census of the United States," Census.Gov, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1853/dec/1850a.html>.

³⁸ Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?," 364–65.

In a similar vein, "what is an abolitionist but a sincere believer in the Declaration of '76?" demanded William Lloyd Garrison, founder of *The Liberator* and co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, on July 4, 1854, right after burning a copy of the U.S. Constitution.³⁹ The Constitution, he explained, was "an agreement with hell" for its blatant support of the slave system through the three-fifths and importation clauses.⁴⁰ On the other hand, however, the Declaration included no reparations nor advancements for abolition. As such, abolitionists reinterpreted and elevated the document's preamble and references of natural liberty, reviving the purpose of Jefferson's original antislave-trade clause. While Congress's 1776 revisions targeted unanimity and sought to inscribe non-controversial doctrine within the nation's founding, the document's broad diction had the opposite effect. Abolitionists weaponized the document's ambiguity on slavery crisis, crafting meaning that would translate to nationwide reform. Consequently, a new wave of declaration-centered arguments inspired new forms of party politics and public persuasion, turning revolutionary language back on the government that tried to contain it.

Proslavery Counterinterpretations and Dred Scott

Since these assertions of universal rights in the Declaration did not explicitly include African Americans, proslavery politicians and judges were able to weaponize this intentional silence to make the argument that the original intention behind the document excluded enslaved African Americans from this egalitarian ethos. As debates around slavery and emancipation accelerated in the following decades, counter-positions arguing that the Declaration's equality language did not apply to Black people began emerging as well. In 1832, Thomas R. Dew, professor at the College of William and Mary, argued in his review of the Virginia slavery debate that "all men are born equal" as proposed by Jefferson constituted only "abstract principles" that could not and should not inform concrete policy making.⁴¹ In 1848, South Carolina's Senator John C. Calhoun went as far as completely rejecting it, arguing the idea that 'all men are born free and equal' constituted a 'dangerous error,' recognizing the Declaration's preamble's risks as a justification argument for antislavery reform.⁴²

³⁹ "The Meeting at Framingham," *The Liberator* 24, no. 27 (July 7, 1854): 106; Massachusetts Historical Society, "A Covenant with Death and an Agreement with Hell," Object of the Month, July 2005, accessed January 23, 2026, <https://www.masshist.org/object-of-the-month/objects/a-covenant-with-death-and-an-agreement-with-hell-2005-07-01>.

⁴⁰ "Garrison's Constitution | National Archives," accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2000/winter/garrisons-constitution-1>.

⁴¹ Thomas R. (Thomas Roderick) Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond: T. W. White, 1832), 46.

⁴² John C. (John Caldwell) Calhoun, "Speech of Mr. Calhoun, of South Carolina, on the Oregon Bill. Delivered in the Senate of the United States, June 27, 1848.," Pamphlet, The Portal to Texas History, 1848, 11, Slavery and Antebellum Texas Culture, 1821-1865, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph498374/m1/11/>.

If Calhoun's leveraging of the ghost of the Declaration's redacted clauses represented a propaganda effort to preserve the peculiar institution, the Supreme Court's 1857 decision on *Dred Scott* saw the codification of racial injustice that explicitly drew upon the legacy of the redaction. In defending his Supreme Court's infamous 7-2 decision that denied U.S. citizenship to African Americans like *Dred Scott* and his family, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney weaponized the Declaration's ambiguity on who was included in the phrase "all men are created equal." Specifically, in an originalist attempt to reconstruct the intention of the founders in drafting the document, Taney argued that

In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants... were... intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument.⁴³

Judging from the language and rhetoric of this majority opinion, the vagueness pertaining to the range of individuals considered by the Declaration enabled Taney and his fellow judges to make this landmark decision that served as one of the indirect catalysts for the Civil War. In other words, had Jefferson's original draft and its redacted clauses on slavery been preserved, Taney's reading and the denial of African American citizenship would have been harder to sustain by invoking the Declaration.

DISCUSSION: OMISSION AND INTERPRETIVE CONFLICT

Political Contingency and Omission

Congress's redaction practice reveals that the universal-rights foundations outlined in the Declaration were not truly held to be "self-evident," but rather, were contingent, at least in practice, on considerations of political motives. As a result, the redaction of these crucial clauses from Jefferson's original draft produced a rather jarring product, a juxtaposition of an egalitarian ethos with a loud silence around the enslavement of Africans in the thirteen colonies at the time. While the Declaration did go on to become a foundational document, and its influence as a rallying cry for the American Revolution contributed significantly to the Patriots' cause during the Revolutionary War, the tension between the sanitized final version and the ghost of the redacted clauses would continue to haunt the American public all the way up until the Civil War. While the document functioned effectively in asserting the nation's newfound independence, its silence on slavery left a moral contradiction within a text that proclaimed universal equality. Over time, that contradiction acquired historical significance as later reformers refashioned the Declaration's signature language of liberty as a benchmark to demand that American practice and ideals at last harmonize.

Competing Interpretations

⁴³ *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1857), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dred-scott-v-sandford>.

Congress's decision to redact the Declaration's slavery clauses may have mitigated short-term regional disunity in the face of war against Britain; yet, it ultimately set a precedent for contestation of political language as a central discursive tool for debates over slavery. Just as Douglass and Garrison mobilized the Declaration's natural rights language to advocate for abolition, proslavery figures such as Calhoun and the Dred Scott Court exploited its silence. As such, the Declaration bound the nation's founding to a pathway of open interpretation rather than taking a definitive stance on the question of slavery. This unresolved contradiction catalyzed reactions defending slavery and inspired reformers who repeatedly referenced 1776 to demand the realization of the Revolution's promises.

Afterlives

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln re-centered the nation's crisis on the Declaration's equality claim, describing the United States as "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," which helped transform the conflict into a struggle over the meaning of the Revolution itself.⁴⁴ In invoking equality as the nation's founding proposition, Lincoln adopted the Declaration's preserved language to explicitly recast the war's meaning, creating specificity out of the broad generalizations. Even a century later, Martin Luther King Jr. urged the nation to "live out the true meaning of its creed," citing the iconic phrase "all men are created equal" once again as a moral force for civil rights reform.⁴⁵ That the same words anchored a Revolution, civil war, a civil rights movement, and polarizing stances on slavery reveals how the Declaration's remaining natural rights language found transformation as a tool to inspire reform and influence arguments for equality across time and place.

CONCLUSION

Like the central tension between Jefferson's own normalization of racial inequality and his rejection of slavery's perpetuation, the Declaration's "missing paragraph" underscores the contradiction between slavery's coexistence with the Declaration's claims of freedom. The rights of African Americans lived in the foundations of the nation yet were revoked through strategic omission, shedding light on the Declaration's original purpose as a symbol of national unity rather than a commitment to universal rights. Despite redaction, the document ultimately equipped future generations with a language of liberty to advance ideals of equality.

⁴⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg" (Gettysburg Address), November 19, 1863, Library of Congress, accessed January 26, 2026.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute (Stanford University), accessed January 26, 2026.

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