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Pauline Maier's *American Scripture:*
Making the Declaration of Independence

Pauline Maier tackles many of the myths that have developed over the centuries since the Declaration of Independence was issued in her book *American Scripture*. She divides her study of this seminal document and its place in the cultural and political landscape of the United States into four chapters which deal with different aspects of the story of the Declaration. As she explains in the introduction, “The book, then, tells two different but related stories—that of the original making of the Declaration of Independence and that of its remaking into the document most Americans know, remember, and revere.”¹ Maier explores the Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary periods in the first chapter of the book. She does a very thorough job explaining the conditions that existed in the colonies during the eighteenth century that led to the break with Great Britain. The second chapter concerns the “other” Declarations of Independence that were issued by several states, townships, and municipalities. Here she unfortunately becomes bogged down in minutiae and although her attention to detail is certainly understandable and even laudable as an historian the flow of the book comes to a screeching halt. The third chapter is a vast improvement on the second and focuses on the actual writing of the

¹ Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Random House, 1997. p. xix.

document and the extraordinary efforts put forth by Jefferson and his colleagues. In the final chapter Maier explains how this document that is now an integral part of the American political canon, along with the Constitution of 1787 and the Bill of Rights, for a time fell into relative obscurity that is shocking to reflect on today; “Considering how revered a position the Declaration of Independence won in the hearts and minds of the American people, their disregard for it in the earliest years of the new nation verges on the incredible.”² She spends some time arguing against the work of other historians, but her chief complaint concerning the story that has been told about the Declaration to this point becomes clear early in her book; “My real problem with most studies of the Declaration of Independence is, in fact, less with what they say than with what they leave out.”³ Overall, although there is a considerable lull in the second chapter, her book is quite interesting and tells the story of the Declaration of Independence in a way that is intellectually stimulating to those who love history and yet simultaneously accessible to non-historians.

Maier takes pains in the first chapter of the book to explain that the colonists were not actively looking for rebellion at the first sign of problems. Indeed, she asserts that they were initially quite content being subjects of the British crown and answering to British laws, “Americans took particular pride in being governed under Britain’s unwritten constitution, which they considered the most perfect form of government ever invented “by the wit of man”—a judgment with which, they often added, every major

² Ibid, p. 160.

³ Ibid, p xvii.

writer on politics agreed.”⁴ The reader is presented with a very convincing case that as late as 1775 a majority of the colonists were still hopeful that the relationship with the mother country could be salvaged. There were some obvious issues that were being worked out and there was a growing resentment of George III and his ministers, yet “...throughout 1775 every Congressional petition, address, or declaration insisted that, despite those provocations, the colonists sought a settlement of their differences with the Mother Country, not Independence.”⁵ The opening pages of *American Scripture* are riveting and draw the reader into the story while at the same time illuminating the circumstances of the mid eighteenth century in the colonies.

Unfortunately the momentum that Maier builds is squandered in the second chapter which becomes overburdened with detail and feels quite cumbersome, especially after the engaging beginning of the book. Maier does clarify that the Declaration of Independence was by no means a totally unique document. Where she loses her narrative flow is in detailing the various other “declarations”; “In truth those state and local “declarations of Independence,” only a select few of which were called “declarations” at the time, are a somewhat miscellaneous set of documents written for a variety of related purposes.”⁶ She should be lauded for her diligence in chronicling as many of these as possible, and her research is very thorough. However, within the strictures of the story she is telling this section is tiresome and moves at a near glacial pace. After spending much time on tedious detail in the first three sections of the second chapter she does succinctly present her argument in the final section, “In their emphasis on particular

⁴ Ibid, p. 29.

⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶ Ibid, p. 48-49.

events, the news of which had sometimes arrived in the colonies only recently, these documents reveal an American people that was well informed and adopted Independence after analyzing the implications of specific recent developments.”⁷

In the third chapter she begins by deliberately confronting the myth of Thomas Jefferson being solely responsible for crafting the Declaration. She puts forth a very persuasive argument that leaves the reader with the distinct impression that this document was a collaborative effort; “In the end, considering its complex ancestry and the number of people who actively intervened in defining its text, the Declaration of Independence was the work not of one man, but of many.”⁸ Maier spends a considerable amount of time debunking other popular myths that have grown around the Declaration. Among these are that the work was primarily meant to justify the actions being taken by the colonists to an audience of European powers; “The situation in 1776 also gives strong reason to think that the Declaration of Independence was designed first and foremost for domestic consumption.”⁹ She also takes umbrage at the notion that the document should be considered chiefly as a philosophical text; “...the Declaration of Independence should be understood first and foremost not as a philosophical but, in the language of the day, as a constitutional document, that is, one that concerned the fundamental authority of government.”¹⁰ Maier also takes aim at the what she perceives as the overuse of the second paragraph of the Declaration, which has been used innumerable times by politicians and historians alike. She argues that this section in particular has had its

⁷ Ibid p. 82.

⁸ Ibid, p. 99.

⁹ Ibid, p. 130-131.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 126.

meaning twisted to bolster any number of arguments, regardless of how pertinent the subject may be. She argues that, “Long essays have in fact been written on one phrase after another from the second paragraph of the Declaration. Unfortunately, no section of that document suffers more from a separation of parts from the whole, since its meaning lies in an escalating sequence of connected assertion.”¹¹ Another important fable that she discredits is the notion that Jefferson wanted to include the abolition of the slave trade in the Declaration but was overruled by other slaveholders. She explains this seeming censorship as problem instead of Jefferson attempting to lay all of the burden of responsibility for this practice on George III. As she explains, this was not a logical or practical argument to make, “...the very acknowledgment that colonists had been in the past or were at present willing participants in the slave trade undermined the assertion that ‘The *Christian* king of Great Britain’ was alone responsible for that outrage on humanity.”¹²

The final chapter of *American Scripture* is perhaps the most intriguing and concerns the evolution of the document and particularly the ways that it was used by Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln’s is perhaps not one of the first names which is conjured up when one thinks of the Declaration, yet she makes a convincing argument that perhaps it should be. She explains that, “In Lincoln’s hands, the Declaration of Independence became first and foremost a living document for an established society, a set of goals to be realized over time, and so an explanation less of the colonist’s decision to separate

¹¹ Ibid, p. 134-135.

¹² Ibid, p. 146.

from Britain than of their victory in the War for Independence.”¹³ Lincoln also used the Declaration to assist him in tackling the toughest problem of the mid-nineteenth century. Maier writes, “...Lincoln understood that it was impossible to separate the Declaration’s condemnation of monarchy from a condemnation of slavery. To deny that kings can justly rule by right of birth was to deny that anyone could rule another, of any race or creed or national origin, without his or her consent.”¹⁴ The status of the Declaration of Independence was ironically bolstered by the arguments put forth by both sides of the slavery issue. Although they certainly disagreed on the interpretation, both slave holders and abolitionists were versed in the common language of the document; “As the future of slavery emerged again as a critical issue in American politics, contenders repeatedly debated the meaning of the Declaration’s assertions of human equality and unalienable rights, which, despite the contrary opinions that swirled around it, served to reinforce the Declaration’s status as a national icon.”¹⁵

Overall Pauline Maier’s book serves to give the reader a much more thorough understanding of the Declaration of Independence. In particular she helps to dispel some of the myths which have taken hold in the public’s understanding of this founding document. An educator reading this book can draw many important and valuable lessons from *American Scripture*. The first is the obvious advantage of having a more complete picture of the Declaration and the ways that it has been used throughout American history. Although there are many lessons to be learned from the text, I believe the ones

¹³ Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.204.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 199.

that will prove most valuable to teaching my classes come from the third chapter of the book concerning “Mr. Jefferson and His Editors”.¹⁶

The first lesson is that students should always approach historical texts taking into account the source of the information that is being presented. Maier explains that there is not a tremendous amount of information about the editing of the text of the Declaration that comes from any source but Jefferson himself, “Only Jefferson’s notes on Congress’s proceeding discuss the subject in any detail, and Jefferson was anything but a dispassionate observer as the Committee of the Whole rewrote or chopped off large sections of his draft, eliminating in the end fully a quarter of his text.”¹⁷ Students are presented with the knowledge that even notes form a towering figure in American History should be approached *cum grano salis*.

The next lesson that can be learned from this is the value of peer editing and peer review of work. This will be especially important for my Advanced Placement United States Government and Politics students, many of whom are among the brightest in the entire school. However, many of them suffer from an intense fear of ever allowing other students to critique their writing. Maier’s explanation of Jefferson’s reluctance to accept constructive criticism should show them that even members of the American political pantheon had their writing improved by peer review. Maier writes, “...what generations of Americans came to revere was not Jefferson’s but Congress’s Declaration, the work not of a single man, or even a committee, but of a larger body of men with the good sense

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 143.

to recognize a ‘pretty good’ draft when they saw it, and who were able to identify and eliminate Jefferson’s more outlandish assertions and unnecessary words.”¹⁸

The final lesson is to always put historical documents in a proper perspective. It is also wise to avoid falling victim to the oversimplification that goes hand in hand with the “Great Man” view of history. While personal attacks on the Founding Fathers using twenty-first century mores may be misguided, so is the unquestioning lionization of these men. Maier eloquently makes this point, “The more alterations Congress made on his draft, the more miserable Jefferson became. He had forgotten, as has posterity, that a draftsman is not an author, and that the ‘declaration on independence’, as Congress sometimes called it, was not a novel, or a poem, or even a political essay presented to the world as the work of a particular writer, but a public document, an authenticated expression of the American mind.”¹⁹ Students will be well served by reading this book, or even just excerpts from it, insofar as they will gain a much deeper understanding of not just this important document but of how it has been used in the centuries since it was written; “No less than its original creation, the redefinition of the Declaration was a collective work by Americans who struggled over several generations to establish policies consistent with the revolutionary heritage as they came to understand it in the only way open to them—through politics.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 150.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 149.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 155.