



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: A gringo teaches the Declaration in Guatemala

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 09.14.26



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I am back at Universidad Francisco Marroquín, a campus I have [praised here before](#) (<https://1819news.com/news/item/allen-mendenhall-the-muso-legacy-of-market-economics-in-a-collectivist-era>), and among the handful of places on earth I would return to without asking why.

I arrived on the Saturday that happened to be the opening of my beloved Auburn Tigers' football season. So, suitcase barely set down, I went hunting for the nearest facsimile of an American sports bar, a place done up with peculiar diligence to resemble every such room from Opelika to Tuscaloosa.

I had it entirely to myself.

The staff, charmed by the novelty of a gringo demanding American football, cut the music and raised the broadcast, so that for hours the whole establishment spoke in nothing but play-by-play.

I hollered. I clutched the bar. The room filled slowly through the afternoon with strangers who wandered in for the noise of it. When Eric Winters flattened a Baylor tight end inches from the goal line to preserve a 17–16 win, I erupted in syllables that belonged to no known language but that every soul present understood at once.

I had come to deliver three lectures and teach a five-day seminar on the Declaration of Independence, timed to its Semiquincentennial

(<https://1819news.com/news/item/allen-mendenhall-can-you-say-semiquincentennial>).

It may strike some readers as peculiar that such a course should be taught in a nation once ruled from Madrid, its law and political theory descended not from Bracton, Coke, Hooker, Hobbes, Sidney, Locke and Blackstone but from the “Siete Partidas” and the Council of the Indies.

The Declaration, after all, is an English grievance, drafted chiefly by a Francophile Virginian steeped in British constitutionalism.

Yet the document was not written for Englishmen alone. Its authors (Jefferson had help) addressed themselves to “a candid world,” inviting judgment from every nation, not merely the one they were leaving. The closing paragraph achieves something bolder still, pronouncing the colonies “Free and Independent States” possessed of the standing to wage war, negotiate peace, and enter alliances.

This is the lexicon of a sovereign claiming a seat among sovereigns.

Between those two gestures sits the famous middle: that all men are created equal, that they hold rights which no government bestowed and none may licitly seize, that authority flows from the consent of the governed, and that a

people wronged retains the standing to alter or abolish what governs them.

None of that is parochial. Quite the contrary: It's the grammar of natural law and natural rights, which, by definition, answers to no single flag.

The abstraction, however, never floats free. It's fastened – or, if you prefer, it's nested, embedded, situated, grounded, contextual, rooted – inside a textual lineage that's unmistakably English. Magna Carta supplied the notion that even a crown answers to law. The Petition of Right and, later, the Bill of Rights of 1689 erected the machinery of enumerated wrongs against a monarch. Locke constructed the architecture of natural right and revocable consent.

Virginia's own Declaration of Rights, drafted weeks earlier by George Mason, lent Jefferson phrases nearly whole. And the long catalog of royal offenses – “He has refused,” “He has forbidden,” “He has plundered” – borrows the cadence of a legal indictment, a bill of particulars laid before a jury of nations. This document is universal in claim and thoroughly Anglo-American in form: a common-law brief wearing the robes of natural philosophy.

That's precisely why the language travels to a lecture hall in Guatemala City without translation of spirit, if not of tongue. My students have a similar story: Guatemala broke from a distant crown in September 1821, in an *Acta* that likewise announced grievance, cited the will of the governed, and declared a people's competence to rule itself.

Long before that, the Spanish scholastics of Salamanca – Vitoria, Las Casas – had argued for rights lodged in nature itself rather than granted by prince or pope, a native root from which the later Enlightenment vocabulary could easily graft.

When these students meet Jefferson's diction, they are not welcoming a stranger, but a cousin raised in a different household with a different accent, yet recognizably kin.

Here's the lesson: The universal is never encountered except through some particular. Abstraction unmoored from history explains nothing; history without the animating idea is only chronicle.

Read the Declaration as pure principle, and you lose the specific quarrel – *that* king, *that* parliament, *that* catalog of insult – which gave the principle its occasion. Read it only as a parochial artifact, and you lose the claim that made the artifact worth keeping. The genealogy of texts behind it does not shrink its authority but, instead, reveals how an idea that belongs to everyone became, on one July afternoon, sayable, signable and enforceable by one people.

Which explains how a man from Auburn, days removed from a football game decided by inches, found himself in Guatemalan classrooms and auditoriums, pontificating about a document written for a contest not his students' own, and discovering that every one of them already understands the words just as well as he.

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