

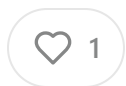
Debating Self-Evident Truths

Review of 'Divided Over the Declaration'



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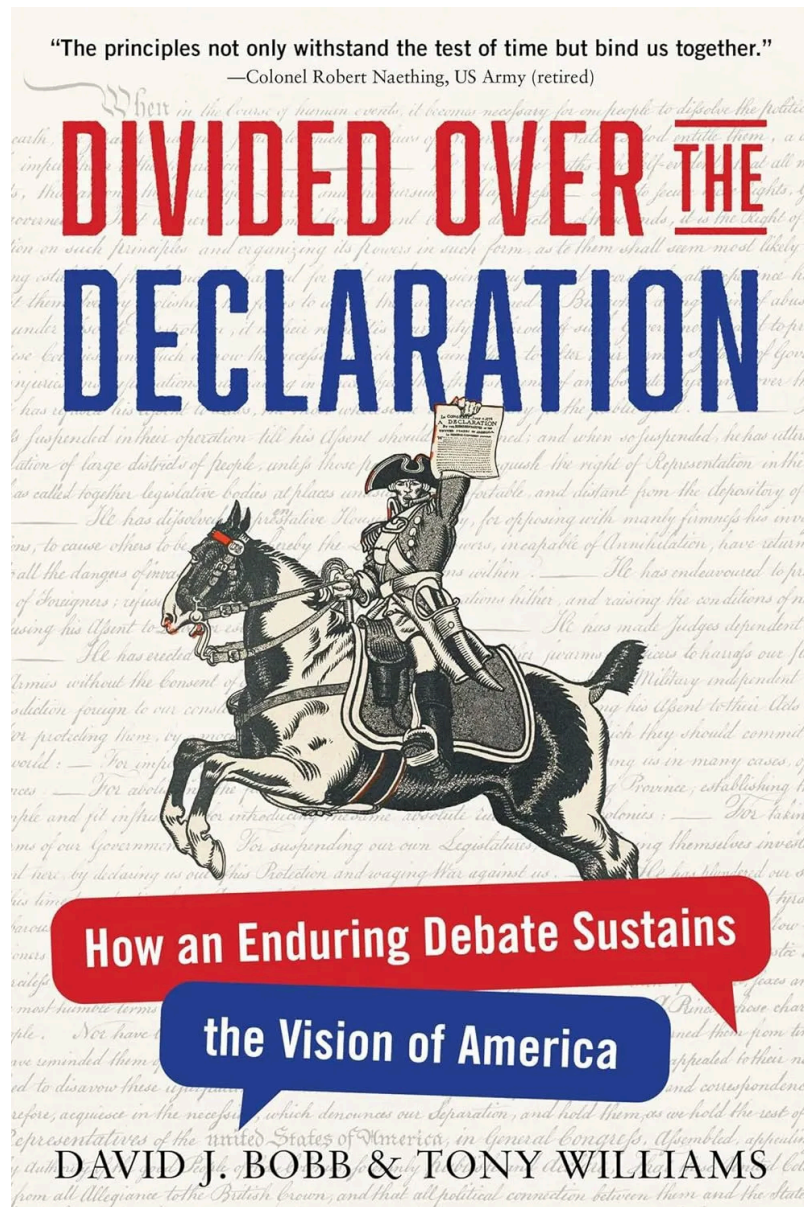


By Allen Mendenhall.

It's the Semiquincentennial of these United States, two and a half centuries since fifty-six men, quills in hand and conscience afire, affixed their signatures to a document that boldly proclaimed to the world that all men are created equal. One might expect the occasion to produce a certain embarrassed hush in the academy, given how fashionable it has become to regard the Declaration of Independence as either a fraud perpetrated by hypocrites or an antiquarian curiosity.

David J. Bobb and Tony Williams, two scholars of serious historical temperament, have none of it. Their new book, [*Divided Over the Declaration*](#), arrives as something more substantial than the typical commemorative volume. It's a sustained and carefully argued account of the long debate over the meaning of the Declaration, and of the peculiar vitality that debate has given the American experiment. Their centre

claim is straightforward: far from signaling failure, the perennial quarrel over the Declaration’s meaning serves, in the authors’ view, as proof of its enduring vitality.



simonandschuster.com/books/Divided-Over-the-Declaration/David-J-Bobb/9798895151709

The opening gambit is a masterwork of framing, beginning not with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, but with Frederick Douglass in Rochester on July 5, 1852, delivering what remains one of the most morally arresting speeches in American political history. Douglass’s dilemma—torn between awe for the Declaration’s lofty principles and indignation at the nation’s recalcitrant failure to honor them—sets the book’s moral

compass with an almost judicial exactitude. Douglass himself called those ideals “saving principles,” and Bobb and Williams adopt the phrase as a kind of interpretive compass.

The authors revisit the document’s origins with careful attention to its structure and purpose. Jefferson, they remind us, was no mere poet, but a careful advocate, assembling a bill of particulars with the precision of a logician: major premise, minor premise, conclusion—justice articulated as argument. The Declaration’s famous philosophical claims establish the principle; the grievances against George III supply the evidence.

In reconstructing the drafting of the document, Bobb and Williams give readers a clear sense of the political pressures surrounding it. Jefferson’s original draft included a condemnation of slavery among the charges against the British crown—language ultimately removed during congressional deliberations. The deletion reflected the difficult political realities facing the Colonies at the moment of independence, a reminder that the founders were engaged in the delicate work of holding together a fragile coalition. Yet, as the authors note, the principles that remained would continue to shape American arguments about justice and liberty for generations.

Bobb and Williams then turn to the relationship between the Declaration and the United States Constitution. Drawing on Abraham Lincoln’s memorable image of “the apple of gold in a picture of silver,” they present the Constitution as the institutional framework designed to secure the moral promise announced in 1776. The debates of the Constitutional Convention, as the authors recount them, reveal how figures such as James Madison struggled to translate the Declaration’s principles into a workable system of government. In this light, the Constitution appears not as a retreat from the ideals of the founding, but as an effort to preserve and operationalize them.

Throughout the 19th century, Americans continued to invoke the Declaration as a source of political authority. Reform movements of various kinds discovered in its language a powerful moral vocabulary. At the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, for

instance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton consciously echoed the Declaration's phrasing in "Declaration of Sentiments," extending its logic to the cause of women's rights. Abolitionists likewise drew upon the document's principles in pressing their arguments. The Declaration's claims, once articulated, proved difficult to confine to a single political moment.

The authors also examine the ways critics of those movements responded. Figures such as John C. Calhoun rejected the universalism of the Declaration outright, arguing that its assertions about equality were neither self-evident nor historically grounded. Bobb and Williams treat such arguments seriously, noting that these debates were part of a broader struggle over the meaning of the American founding itself.

In Lincoln's hands, the Declaration became the central text of American political identity. His reflections in the Gettysburg Address famously measured the nation's legitimacy not from the Constitution of 1787 but from the Declaration of 1776. By invoking "four score and seven years," Lincoln located the republic's true birth in the proposition of human equality—a proposition that, he argued, the Civil War would test and ultimately reaffirm.

Bobb and Williams extend their story beyond the 19th century, showing that the debate over the Declaration did not end with the Civil War. Questions about American empire at the turn of the 20th century raised new challenges: could a nation founded on consent legitimately govern distant peoples who had never granted it? Meanwhile progressives and conservatives alike returned to the founding document to defend competing visions of American government.

The civil rights era provided yet another moment in which the Declaration's language proved indispensable. At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King, Jr., famously described the Declaration as a promissory note: a commitment to equality that the nation had not yet fully redeemed. Standing nearby was John Lewis, whose own life would embody the effort to press America toward that promise. In the authors' telling, the civil rights movement neither repudiated nor

supplanted the founding; it appealed to it with moral eloquence, invoking the very principles that had long animated the American experiment and tested its consciences.

Bobb and Williams conclude with a measured optimism about the future of the American experiment. Despite the rhetoric of polarization, they note that many Americans still share a basic attachment to the ideals articulated in 1776. The challenge, in their view, lies not in inventing new principles, but in recovering an old civic understanding of the ones we already possess. That task requires a renewal of historical knowledge and civic education, a willingness to study the founding documents seriously and to debate their meaning with intellectual honesty.

This work is both a careful study of American political thought and a thoughtful civic reflection. One need not accept every interpretive judgment to appreciate the achievement. As we celebrate the Semiquincentennial, *Divided Over the Declaration* reminds us that the enduring power of the Declaration lies precisely in its ability to provoke argument, reflection, and renewal. Its principles continue to demand careful interpretation—and they reward, with no small measure of irony and justice, those who would dare to take them seriously.



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