

Rhetoric of john locke in the declaration of independance assignment

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The Declaration of Independence is arguably the most important document in American history and possibly its greatest example of successful rhetoric. Yet one must wonder why this is so when there are no original ideas, new assertions of political dogma, or even a true declaration of independence contained in this brief document. In fact, most of the document itself seems to have been plagiarized, or at least pulled heavily from John Locke, enough that "Richard Henry Lee said the Declaration had been 'copied from Locke's treatise on government. (Stephens 55) Why, then, is it considered to be the foundation on which American Democracy stands, and why did it effectively unify a burgeoning nation against an enemy in a war for its independence? The answer must lie in the rhetoric used in the document as well as in the constraints of the people from the thirteen United States that bound them to seventeenth-century Lockean philosophies in the first place.

Therefore, in order to create the Declaration of Independence as both a unifying force to the country as well as a justification to the rest of the world, Lockean rhetoric was used as the foundation to the document's logic and pathos that, whether employed precisely or altered purposefully, took advantage of the constraints held by the thirteen states. In order to understand the effect of the rhetoric used in the Declaration of Independence, one must first examine the history leading up to it. Though, popularly, this document is known for declaring the independence of the new United States of America, that view is not exactly correct.

On June 7th, 1776, Richard Henry Lee had offered up a resolution of independence, and on July 2nd, 1776, John Adams, along with some other founding fathers, passed this resolution through Congress. Therefore, the <https://assignbuster.com/rhetoric-of-john-locke-in-the-declaration-of-independence-assignment/>

Declaration of Independence was merely restating what had already been settled on two days before. " In other words, the direct goal of independence had already been proclaimed before the formal statement of justification for the action, in effect the ideology had been officially approved. (Grimes 5) This, then, goes to prove that since Jefferson and the other framers of the Declaration already had the budding nation's consent, they were free to use rhetoric native to colonial ideology, the rhetoric of John Locke, in order to construct both the justification to foreign nations and the unifying aspects for the colonies. Also, it is important to note that with the consent of the thirteen states already obtained, the Declaration of Independence was not directly written for the people of these states, as is so often implicated currently, but for the major foreign powers of the time.

As Thomas Jefferson himself said, " an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments...but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. (Grimes 5) However, by agreeing to send the Declaration to the world, the thirteen states consented to the rhetoric therein, and the framers took advantage of that. They, accordingly, used Locke's rhetoric, both exact and altered, to create a unity of nationhood through communal consent of the document's language. The document, therefore, used the rhetoric of the people of the United States, originating from John Locke, which they knew to be " self-evident", and his principles in order to justify their actions to the world and to unify the states.

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To prove furthermore that the Colonies' political philosophies, not simply Thomas Jefferson's, were intertwined with those espoused by John Locke, and that the constraints of the people therein were such as to completely accept Lockean rhetoric, one needs only to examine the original draft of the Declaration. Originally appearing in the second paragraph of the Declaration was the statement, "We hold these truths to be [sacred and undeniable] self-evident(sic), that all men are created equal and independent," (Jefferson) which was then condensed to "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. (Declaration). In the "Two Treatises on Government", Locke states that when men are in a State of Nature they are in "A State also of Equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another: there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species...should also be equal one amongst another..." (Locke 309) The authors, apart from Jefferson, having complete knowledge of Locke's rhetoric, made sure that only his rhetoric and not that of Jefferson came through when they edited Jefferson's original expositional "sacred and undeniable" and "independent". These were only three words, but, as they did not conform exactly to Locke's terminology, they were eliminated from the final draft. The framers' comprehensive knowledge of Lockean rhetoric shows that it was completely accepted and "self-evident" indeed in the minds of the statesmen. It must be admitted, however, that there are instances, which shall be dealt with, of rhetoric in the Declaration that does stray from Lockean preciseness, but for a purpose much grander than exposition.

To add analysis to the Declaration of Independence in order to prove America's social and political dependence on the philosophies of John Locke, Michael P. Zuckert, a John Locke enthusiast and author, says that one may also examine the "expressions of the American mind," i. e. documents of the same age, sermons, and political debates. He goes on to say that he "and others have argued previously, the source ultimately lying behind the bulk of these outpourings of the American mind is John Locke. (Zuckert 206) For example, if one were to examine Common Sense, a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine in 1776, one would find phrases such as "declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind," and "Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil." (Paine 1) Both of these ideas are common in Locke's treatises, though Paine simplifies the language in order to relate to the common people who flocked to the familiar rhetoric.

Therefore, by examining "the expressions of the American mind," it is shown that the rhetoric of John Locke was commonplace in many contemporary documents and not just unique to the Declaration. Because they had the consent of the new nation, and that new nation was already ingrained with Lockean rhetoric, the authors of the Declaration were able to use that rhetoric as a unifying force for the states.

Though the states were already unified in an act of succession, they were not necessarily unified as a country yet, and, therefore, the declaratory framers adopted this agenda as well. Their most powerful rhetorical devices employed are appeals to logos. Though logos is not ascribed as a Lockean

device alone, in fact logic is a hallmark to all enlightenment writers, what makes the logos of the Declaration Lockean is the fact that the it is solely and wholly founded and based on his rhetorical principles.

The first example of an appeal to logos is the first paragraph of the Declaration: 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. Declaration) This leading paragraph automatically and logically unifies the country in rhetoric by using this proof: If one group of people is sharing injustices from another, that group of people, as a whole, should let be known to the world why they will seek a separation; We are seeking this separation and are about to let the world know why; We, therefore, are one people ??? united. This simple, underlying proof establishes from the beginning of the document the intention of the authors to convince the people of the united thirteen states that they were already a nation.

Yet another proof is exemplified in the second paragraph of the document. The proof states that when a ruler commits abuses in order to keep people under the heel of despotism, the people have a right, in fact a necessity to revolt. The people of the thirteen states have been put in that situation. Therefore, the Colonies, as a whole, must unite against the ruler. Again, the

same type of proof shows the authors' intent to unify the country through general consent of these Lockean principles.

A Statement of policy is indicated as well, through Lockean rhetoric, in the second paragraph of the Declaration in order to unify the states by the inference of the creation of a new government. It is subtle and assumed, rather than blunt and obvious. After establishing the self-evident rights of man, the Declaration tells the reader "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." (Declaration) Within this phrase lies a myriad of Lockean thought and rhetoric including, but not limited to his 'social contract' and 'state of nature' theories.

Basically, what these combined theories amount to in regards to that sentence in the Declaration is the fact that in a state of "complete freedom men cannot live well. Life is precarious...Consequently, although all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, everyone is in fact subject to death, slavery, and misery. They soon join together to form a government for the sake of 'moral security' for [their] lives and properties." (West 114) That being the case, as the authors and colonists knew it to be, one can follow this train of thought to its logical conclusion.

Since it was the right, nay the duty of the colonies to overthrow the unjust despotism of King George, the colonies would be left with no government. However, since by necessity governments must be formed in order to secure man's natural rights, the colonists would, logically, have to form their own unified government to do so. This, due to the rhetoric of John Locke,

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becomes a claim of policy, indicating that the framers intended to unify all those who participated in this Declaration (the thirteen colonies) under one, new government, and the colonies, through the consent of the document, sanctioned it.

Also, it must be addressed, that the intentional (intentional is used here because it must be perceived so due to the familiarity of Locke's texts amongst the authors) deviation from Locke's rhetoric was also done in an attempt to bring unity to the people of the states through consent of the document. One instance is exemplified in the second paragraph of the Declaration, "...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. The phrase, "pursuit of happiness" does not appear in Lockean texts, instead it is listed as "property", "land", or "possessions". There is no question that colonists were indeed landowners, almost all of them having land, possessions, and property, so why would this have been done? One reason it was phrased like this was to separate the people of the colonies from the landowners and inheritors of the feudal society in Europe. If this is true, then this phrase would have served as a unifying force for the states against their common adversary across the Atlantic, firmly tying them into a bond of like-minded, principled people.

Another, rather large, aspect to Locke's two treatises that was edited out by Congress dealt with the issue of slavery. In the rough draft of the Declaration, Jefferson included a small tirade against slavery and King George's consent to allow the slave trade to continue; it was included in the

paragraph following the grievances against King George. " One of Jefferson's strong complaints was that the King permitted the slave trade. He condemned him for violating the ' most sacred rights of liberty' in doing so, but the clause was omitted by the Congress in order to preserve the unanimity of the states against England. " (Stephens 59) Because the southernmost colonies could not survive economically without the slave trade, there would not have been any possible way to get them to agree to a Declaration that included a negative outlook on the slave trade. Though this issue would cause a rift in the country later in its course, during the time of the Revolution this omission of a major Lockean claim served as a very direct unifying force for the colonies.

Though the Declaration of Independence had the underlying aim of uniting the thirteen colonies, Lockean rhetoric and logic was also used as the justification of the American Revolution to the world, and the most glaring appeal to logos that is absolutely Lockean in origin is the proof of the document as a whole. The document, as it is structured, sits in three parts: first, the clarification of the natural rights and obligation of men; second, the list of grievances against the king; and third, the resolution of independence.

These sections represent the premises and conclusion to the entire syllogism. The proof, therefore, is laid out the same way. " Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it. " Then, " the history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states," and

“[the king’s] form of government [is] destructive of these ends. This second claim is proven true by the list of grievances said to be “ facts submitted to a candid world. ” In conclusion, therefore, “ these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states. ” The Declaration of Independence, consequently, turns out to be its own proof, based on the rhetoric of John Locke, in justifying rebellion against England to the entire world. (Zuckert 210) The statement of policy in the final paragraph of the Declaration uses the principles of Locke’s government to appeal to foreign nations recognition of the united colonies as a new government.

The authors claim that the united states, as independent states, have the right to “ levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. ” (Declaration) These rights are an echo of what is contained in the British Bill of Rights, which are also based upon enlightenment ideas that pull heavily from Locke. The Lockean rhetoric applied here, then, is effective twofold. Firstly, Lockean rhetoric follows the structure of the Declaration being presented, acting as the foundation to the document’s language.

Secondly, it serves as a justification based upon the usurper’s law, not allowing much room for argument on the English side. There are also claims of pathos, founded on Locke’s rhetoric and dealing with religion, that are found in variety within the Declaration. This point is rather important due to the fact that the major powers the Declaration aimed at were also Christian nations, and bringing God onto the side of the revolution could have been

and was a very powerful source of rhetoric to prove the justification of succession to the world.

For example, in the final paragraph, there is an appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of [their] intentions,” (Declaration) that directly links the authors’ thoughts with a more righteous mindset, engendering them with the Christian countries across the ocean. The use of ‘Supreme Judge’, in this instance, rather than ‘God’ illustrates the authors’ desire to be arbitrated by the one, true, Lockean God who has imbued them with their self-evident rights, and whom they already know has justified this rebellion.

This is one obvious religious claim in the text that shows how Locke’s rhetoric, even on religion, was used to defend their decision concerning independence. A more hidden aspect of pathos in regards to religion lies in the story telling of the second paragraph. Though this paragraph does not directly address religion at all, it can be argued that, due to the profound usage of Lockean rhetoric in it, this paragraph tells of the biblical journey of man. Analyzing the “self-evident” truths, one can read a story of three parts in it. At first, man is created (by the Creator) with his unalienable rights.

In order to secure those rights, man must then create government.

Inevitably, the government will fail, forcing the people to do their duty and overthrow it. These words, in and of themselves, are direct and to the point, however, this is the rhetoric of John Locke whose entire first treatise on government was based on refuting monarchy by inheritance by comparing Adam’s power by creation to his power by fatherhood. Locke’s work is

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steeped in religion, and it is, therefore, not irrational to follow his logic that direction and see the first two sentences of the second paragraph as a parallel to the more familiar story of the origin of man.

Just as in the Declaration, the Bible begins with the creation of man who obtains his unalienable rights from the Creator. He then sins in the garden, which begets more sin and so on. When society becomes bad enough, the Lord must act on our behalf and send a flood or His Son. As Michael Zuckert puts it, "The biblical stories then have three main moments: the original divine action of creation, which brings a world both good in itself and good for humanity; the human action of falling, of sin, of crime, which largely erases the goodness of the origin; and finally, the salvific divine action of giving the law or giving his "only begotten son." (Zuckert 211) This may seem rather far-fetched, but with the constraints on the intended audience, for Europe also was well versed in Lockean rhetoric, this was a very palpable rhetorical path to follow, and was one that probably engendered the mind of the reader to the mind of the secessionist very successfully. "The propositions which were intended to justify the act of separation from the British empire," and act as a unifying source to the thirteen states, "transcended [those] issues and occasion[s] to become values which constituted the ultimate tests of democratic political legitimacy. (Grimes 6) It did this through its foundation on the rhetoric of John Locke and because of the complete incorporation of his ideals into the colonial mindset. Had not the constraints of the colonists been so bent, the Declaration of Independence might have only played a minor role in the democracy of America. However, through the craft of the Declaration's engineers in <https://assignbuster.com/rhetoric-of-john-locke-in-the-declaration-of-independence-assignment/>

in conjunction with the seventeenth century philosopher, John Locke, the Declaration of Independence was able to both unite a nation and justify colonial actions across the sea, and it accomplished this all using only one tool, rhetoric.

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