

The Genesis of the Declaration of Independence

By [Zach Hutchins](#)

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Fireworks this Friday will celebrate the signing of [the Declaration of Independence](#) almost 250 years ago. The founders' assurance "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" was authorized by "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God." But the meaning of that phrase has been the subject of heated debate for some time. For example, [John Fea suggests](#) that because the document's primary purpose was to "announce the birth of the United States to the world" readers cannot point to phrases such as "endowed by their Creator" and "Nature's God" as [language originally understood to mean that](#) "human rights came from God."

But the concept of natural law and phrases such as "Nature's God" had been used to signal a theistic understanding of government for centuries before Thomas Jefferson put pen to paper. Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, political theorists hardly noted for their piety, presented natural law as a code of conduct instituted by the God of Genesis, at the creation of the world. "This original law of nature," [wrote John Locke](#), can be traced back to the divine injunction in [Genesis 1:28](#) when

God and his reason commanded him [Adam] to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that, in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled, and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.

The right reason and commandments given by God to Adam in Eden were a basis for the "law of nature" that forbids one individual "to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" [in Locke's thinking](#).

James Otis and other colonial agitators who paved the way for American Revolution also grounded their claims in the language of Genesis. *The Rights of the British*

Colonies (1764) [[read in pdf](#)] popularized the doctrines that Jefferson would later incorporate into the Declaration. There Otis rejected Parliament's attempts to tax the colonies:

There must be in every instance, a higher authority, viz. GOD. Should an act of parliament be against any of *his* natural laws, which are *immutably* true, *their* declaration would be contrary to eternal truth, equity and justice, and consequently void.

Government, Otis argued, is an outgrowth of God's work in Eden:

The same omniscient, omnipotent, infinitely good and gracious Creator of the universe, who has been pleased to make it necessary that what we call matter should *gravitate* . . . has made it *equally* necessary that from *Adam* and *Eve* to these degenerate days, the different sexes should sweetly *attract* each other, form societies of *single* families, of which *larger* bodies and communities are as naturally, mechanically, and necessarily combined, as the dew of Heaven and the soft distilling rain is collected by the all enliv'ning heat of the sun.

Government is therefore most evidently founded *on the necessities of our nature*

Colonists versed in both the Bible and the natural law tradition viewed their freedom from tyranny as a right guaranteed by God during the creation in Genesis. Their rejection of parliamentary authority would allow individuals such as [Benjamin Church](#), an army physician and a member of the Sons of Liberty movement, to throw off the shackles of tyranny and live "according to his own just sentiments and innocent inclinations." The Declaration of Independence was, thus, a declaration of innocence—a declaration [of Eden](#). It created the United States of America from a group of like-minded colonists by invoking a natural law tradition based on the biblical account of creation. A belief in the God of Genesis was fundamental to the founding of the new nation that is celebrated each Fourth of July.

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