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Myths and the American Nation: Jefferson's Declaration and the development of American nationalism

Introduction

The United States of America (US) is a state that does not have a traditional nation. Composed primarily of hundreds of years of immigration, it is a quintessential multinational state. Nationalism as an ideology, however, has been popular throughout its history and with nationalism comes the use of myth to construct the idea of a country's nation. One competing version of that American nation relies in part on the appropriation of an early foreign policy document, the famous 1776 Declaration of Independence. The myths surrounding the document have built for two hundred years within American culture, ignoring the historical context and original meaning of the text itself. This cultural construction has helped build a creedal version of nationalism, a nationalism based around joint connection of a people to a set of principles rather than a common ethnic heritage, which has competed with a more traditional ethno-cultural based nationalism throughout American political development. This article suggests that the historical context of the Declaration matters for understanding the myth building necessary within certain nationalist ideologies competing for national identity in a state with no easily socially constructed primordial nation. This myth building has been possible even when the myth has to ignore and distort the basic historical and philosophical context surrounding one of the most universally taught documents in a culture.

There is a widespread American myth that the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson is an important founding document for *domestic* politics in the

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United States¹. This myth continues to spread through popular culture, political discourse, and academic textbooks². One excellent American government textbook refers to it as a “constitutional document”³. It is common to hear on television the words of the Declaration mentioned in the context of understanding the implied rights granted by the US Constitution. The direct implication is that it was a document that created the American country and should guide our politics and society in general. Some of its words are referenced as the American “Creed” by textbooks and taught to American children so often that it has a few words that every American can recite like words from the national anthem.

The 1987 Bicentennial celebrations of the US Constitution re-popularized the philosophical linking of the US Constitution and the Declaration. Popular culture and politicians quickly made adjustments to a speech made at Disney World on October 3, 1986 by the former Chief Justice, Warren Burger, who had retired to become Chairman of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the US Constitution. He asserted in his speech that “the Declaration of Independence was the promise, the Revolution brought us our independence, and the Constitution was what we did with our independence”⁴. Becoming a commonplace idea after being “coined” by Burger, the idea quickly and popularly morphed into the Constitution as the fulfillment of the promises of the Declaration of Independence, a statement objected to by Justice Thurgood Marshall who argued the Constitution had no such intention. The idea found a natural home in American political culture. The 106th Congress in 2000 actually published copies of the two documents entitled “The Declaration of Independence was the promise; the Constitution was the fulfillment”⁵. This mythological construction attributed to Burger can be found paraphrased on the National Constitution Center’s website. The site goes on to claim that “to fairly apply the Constitution and its structure to contemporary problems, one must never travel very far from the ‘self-evident truths’ that men and women are ‘created equal’”⁶.

The Burger reference appears as well on the US Citizenship and Immigration website that provides copies of both documents as an outward facing image of our political

¹ J. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, Toronto 1980.

² I will refer to July 4, 1776 Declaration of Independence as “Jefferson’s Declaration”.

³ M. Landy, S.M. Milkis, *American Government: Balancing Democracy and Rights*, Oxford 2008, p. 50. The same page also refers to the all-out war that had been going for over a year and a rebellion that had been going on for longer as an “incipient rebellion”.

⁴ *The Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution, We The People: The Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution, 1985-1992 Final Report*, 1992, p. 32.

⁵ 106th Congress, 2nd Session, *The Declaration of Independence was the promise; the Constitution was the fulfillment*, House Document 2000, pp. 106-215, www.gpo.gov [access on: 13.10.2017].

⁶ A.R. Amar, D.W. Kmiec, *Perspectives on the Constitution: Understanding Our Constitution*, National Constitution Center, <https://constitutioncenter.org/learn/educational-resources/historical-documents/perspectives-on-the-constitution-understanding-our-constitution> [access on: 13.10.2017].

culture. The website has a message stating “the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are the two most important, [*sic*] and enduring documents in our Nation's history. It has been said that ‘the Declaration of Independence was the promise; the Constitution was the fulfillment’⁷. The myth has helped shape our political development, both support for the myth and reactions against it. It has also been used to support important social movements over the centuries. However, the myth obscures the historical context and meaning of the Declaration as a document with a text and specific political purpose. Instead, the foreign policy act itself and a few elements of the document developed into a symbol divorced from the original meaning.

Obscuring the enhanced prominence given to the document by social movements beginning in the 1820s and eventually President Abraham Lincoln in turn obscures the important role it plays in an ideological debate over nationalism that continues to exist today. The vote on July 2, 1776 by the Second Continental Congress concerning the independence portion of Richard Henry Lee's June 7 resolution for a declaration of independence, the forming of foreign alliances and the formation of a government for the independent country was primarily an act of foreign policy necessary to secure alliances and open trade in war materials with European countries. The final signatures were not made on the announcement until November of 1776; all stages of the resolution's release and formalization receiving a modicum of acclaim throughout the already at-war colonies.

Arguably the most famous five words, “all men are created equal”, were repurposed from their original enlightenment-era meaning by social movements in the 1820s. Instead of an enlightenment-era fundamental assertion of social contract theories of political legitimacy, the words were used as a way of laying claim to civil and even economic rights. Pre-civil war abolitionists, including Frederick Douglas in 1852, laid claim to the words as hypocritical to the reality of slavery and slavery as therefore un-American. President Lincoln and others repurposed the words again with the goal of championing one side of an ideological debate over the proper basis of nationalism in US ideology and identity. Prominent use by social movements continued throughout the twentieth century, with for example Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drawing on the mythical interpretation of the text with his famous speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. The use of enlightenment rhetoric to inform ideological political development continues into the twenty-first century. The claim of the Jefferson's Declaration as an aspirational *founding* document rather than a rebuilding one used by Lincoln and others obscures the arc of the ideological debate over national identity that it represents.

⁷ *US Citizenship and Immigration Services*, <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Office%20of%20Citizenship/Citizenship%20Resource%20Center%20Site/Publications/PDFs/M-654.pdf> [access on: 13.10.2017].

Historical context of Jefferson's Declaration

The Declaration was a press release of a vote taken by the Second Continental Congress as an important act of foreign policy in order to secure trade in war materials and alliances in an ongoing war. It is commonly acknowledged as the “cornerstone document in the history of U.S. foreign relations”⁸. It was the announcement to the world that the British colonies, engaged in an ongoing war for independence, were officially joining the international system as independent entities that could form alliances and sign economic treaties.

The 1776 Jefferson's Declaration was one among many, although it was one with critical importance for foreign policy. By July of 1776, many of the colonial governments had already declared home rule to the same degree as seen during the early stages of decolonization and the dismantling of empires in the twentieth century. All that was lacking was internationally recognized *de jure* independence for all of the states, mostly because of uncertainty in the middle colonies. The most historically dramatic capstones of the process were the Virginia Convention's June 12, 1776 Declaration of Rights (influencing the drafting Jefferson was doing on the Continental Congress' Declaration of Independence) and the June 29 Constitution of Virginia which *de jure* created a wholly independent country of Virginia.

On May 10, 1776 the Second Continental Congress resolved to send a message to all the states that the state governments should flesh out whatever was necessary to complete home rule. The preface for the resolution, written by John Adams and approved *without unanimity* a few days later on May 15, declared the people of the states would no longer be governed by Britain and that the people should create governments for themselves to protect “their lives, liberties, and properties”⁹. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee explicitly proposed means of seeking a foreign alliance and military supplies through European trade. European states would not negotiate alliances unless there was a formal breaking from any even symbolic rule from Britain and most were unwilling to trade the large amount of war materials necessary to successfully fight the war to what were still technically colonies of Britain. Legally, they were in a civil war and not an entity under international law that could negotiate treaties.

Lee's three part resolution was for a formal declaring of 13 independent states, to take any steps necessary for forming foreign alliances, and the creation of a confederation of the independent states¹⁰. Committees were formed from the three parts of the resolution to create the Declaration of Independence, the Model Treaty, and the Articles of Confederation. The first to return its work for vote was the five-man commit-

⁸ W. Weeks, *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Cambridge 2013, p. 22.

⁹ P. Maier, *Declaring Independence*, [in:] *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution 1760-1791*, edit. R. Brown, 2nd ed., Houghton Mifflin 2000, p. 184.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

tee with the simplest task, the Independence resolution's wording. The primary drafting was done by Thomas Jefferson because the more complex work of the treaty model and Confederation governance needed to be done in the other committees. Jefferson was known mostly as Peyton Randolph's cousin who knew how to write well and had a party-trick of a memorized list of grievances against the king to which he was always adding. The committee and Congress amended a draft which contained an elegant expression of commonplace (Jefferson's word for it) notions of enlightenment rights and a list of grievances specifically against the monarch of Britain, impressively managing to invent a few more grievances than previous publications had.

Lee's Resolution passed on July 2 without New York's vote and the language for the press release was approved on July 4. What was unique about the document was that unanimity was finally achieved a week later when the endlessly equivocating New York approved of it. Upon being delivered around the colonies, some public notice of it was taken, particularly the tearing down of some statues of the king and some public readings such as happened with a brief but noteworthy celebration in Boston. Otherwise, the war went on and Congress set about the business of forming alliances and buying gunpowder. The only reason the July 2, 1776 vote on independence was taken by the Congress was to make the necessary legal step to securing foreign aid. This appears in the debates, the resolution itself, Jefferson's notes, and the instructions from the states to their Congressional delegations.

The contextual meaning of "All men are created equal"

There is no tension between slavery and the inclusion in Jefferson's declaration "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights". "Right" in Jefferson's time was commonly seen in the David Hume and Francis Hutcheson sense as the power of dominion over something. Unalienable rights to which all men are equally entitled is the enlightenment description of the source of political legitimacy, not a nineteenth to twenty-first-century conception of rights to which individuals are entitled as a protection from government intrusion¹¹. Colonial-era Americans generally did not consider natural rights as being individual rights, mostly concerning themselves with the importance of communal civil and political liberty, the principle of the people needing to participate in government for the good of the society¹².

This is even reflected in the airing of grievances in Jefferson's Declaration. The grievances listed are mostly intrusions on the liberty of the communal public. The popular Whig ideology and the influential Scottish philosophers believed that the dissolving of the social contract, i.e. revolution, was acceptable when such grievances went unresolved. To quote Hutcheson, much favored by Jefferson:

¹¹ G. Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, New York 1978, p. 215.

¹² D. Farber, S. Sherry, *A History of the American Constitution*, Saint Paul 1990, p. 11.

But as the end of all civil power is acknowledged by all to be the safety and happiness of the whole body, any power not naturally conducive to this end is unjust; which the people, who rashly granted it under an error, may justly abolish again when they find it necessary to their safety to do so. [...] The rights of the governor, as they are more important than those of any one private man, may be deemed more sacred than his private rights; but can never be deemed more sacred than the rights of the whole body. [...] A good subject ought to bear patiently many injuries done only to himself. [...] But when the common rights are trampled upon [the governor] has forfeited all the power committed to him¹³.

Within the ideological context of the time, the equality of all men was the assertion of moral virtue being equal in all, at least in its potential. This common possession of moral virtue, rather than being uniquely given by God to a monarch, was the basis of the self-governing individual¹⁴. Jefferson did, in fact, believe in a Hutchesonian sense all men were born with equal amounts of the primary governing faculty, that of moral virtue¹⁵. He saw his slaves as being inferior in practically all other important ways, but deserving of self-government due to being equal in the potential for moral virtue¹⁶.

Lockean conceptions of individual rights and a property-basis of natural law did not become dominant in the United States until the late nineteenth century¹⁷. What a reader can find in most freshman American Government textbooks as the “Creed” of the United States contained in Jefferson’s Declaration, was at the time a commonly accepted late eighteenth-century Enlightenment assertion found within a wide variety of different social contract theories of political legitimacy in the pursuit of political liberty for a society, *not an aspirational statement of social equality and civil rights for individuals*.

The growth of mythical stature and the foundations of nationalism

The act of celebrating an unified declaring of independence grew during the eighteenth century, but little attention was paid to the contents of the document¹⁸. By the war’s end, some states were seeing a celebration of victory in the war mixed with the “signing” of the declaration on July 4, something that hadn’t actually happened. In the 1790s, celebration of the U.S. Constitution was rolled into what was ultimately an arbitrary date of celebration. Debates over the Constitution hadn’t mentioned the language of Jefferson’s Declaration. The early American histories of the period paid it little or no attention until 1817¹⁹. The first state constitution to adopt its language was Wis-

¹³ F. Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, trans. W. McKenzie, Book 3, Dublin 1747, pp. 238-239.

¹⁴ G. Wills, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹⁵ Jefferson’s philosophies were the moral-sense school of Hutcheson, not the social contract based on property rights school of Locke.

¹⁶ G. Wills, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹⁷ D. Farber, S. Sherry, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ G. Wills, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-344.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 324.

consin's, in 1848. Although the act of independence was mixed together with other patriotic symbols, the text of the document was largely ignored for decades. Its primary target was foreign propaganda, particularly aimed at France – even there it was ignored, even during the French Revolution. Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in the early nineteenth century and was obsessed with what he saw as the relative equality in America and never mentioned Jefferson's Declaration, certainly not seeing equality as the goal of the American Revolution in any case. Really, the only one obsessed with the text of the Declaration was Jefferson himself, who brooded for years over the changes Congress made to it²⁰.

Authorship led to some political interest in the mid-1790s when there was fighting between Jefferson and John Adams over authorship of the Declaration during election campaigns, as well as charges of plagiarism against Jefferson. The latter was answered by Jefferson that he hadn't been charged with doing anything original and that his assertions were commonplace beliefs and phrases, a voicing of his age's common sense. In the words of historian Pauline Maier, the Declaration was intentionally unexceptional²¹. Into the 1800s, Adams maintained that the Declaration was theatrical propaganda done as a group project²². Authorship was used as a tool of sniping between Federalists and Republicans; July 4 commemorations only mutually agreeing on remembering the act of independence, rather than the text of the public document announcing it.

Politically resurrecting the document itself as a patriotic symbol started after the War of 1812 had been fought. Anti-British nationalism had been stoked by the war and reprinting of the Declaration became something of a popular hit by 1817, expensive and artistic engraved designs covered with patriotic symbols and portraits being sold for outlandish prices, up to 13 dollars for the truly elaborate ones²³. The U.S. Congress commissioned in 1817 for its rotunda the famous painting by John Trumbull of his imagined vision of the presentation of the drafting committee's Declaration. Pauline Maier has ably tracked the rise of sacred language used in reference to the Declaration after the war, long before Lincoln was to do so as noted by many other historians. The hap- penstance of Adams and Jefferson dying on July 4, 1826, a day already prepared for 50th anniversary Declaration celebrations, caught the imagination of Americans.

Social movements in the 1820s seized upon the "all men are created equal" phrase, declaring their movements inherently American through reference to Jefferson's Declaration. Farmers, workers and women's rights movements regularly declared equality

²⁰ See: T. Jefferson, *Autobiography*, 1821, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jeffauto.asp [access on: 24.10.2017].

²¹ P. Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, New York 1998.

²² R. McDonald, *Thomas Jefferson's Changing Reputation as the Author of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years*, "Journal of the Early Republic" 1999, No. 19(2), p. 169.

²³ *Declaration of Independence*, "The Virginia Chronicle", p. 2, March 18, 1817, <https://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=GL18170318.2.8> [access on: 25.03.2017].

as an intrinsic part of the American political system²⁴. This new meaning for the words grew equality as an American aspirational ideal within a particular ideological vision of the country. In addition to specific policy demands supported by the movements, that ideological vision included the construction of an American nation with a membership defined as supportive of the aspirational ideal that was being built on mythical foundations. As the new nation struggled with self-definition, tied together by civic ideals, the language of the Jefferson's Declaration was co-opted to support an emerging myth.

A "nation" is most commonly used to refer to a group of people with a common language, culture, shared history, and an ancient homeland that should belong politically to the nation²⁵. However, this "imagined community" as Benedict Anderson calls it, can imagine itself in any fashion it wants, often changing over time and altering who is included and who is excluded from the boundaries of the nation²⁶. Such a defining of the word nation reminds us that a nation as used by most is a socially created construct, not an objectively measurable physical one based on bloodlines. Although scholars use many definitions of nationalism, the category of "civic nationalism" is often used in the United States to refer to an ideological vision of a "nation" as a citizenry of a country bound together by a common support for liberal values, political institutions, collective historical memories, and a willingness of that citizenry to uphold the civic traditions of the country²⁷. As Rogers Brubaker points out, this defining of "civic nationalism" is a very broad and ambiguous term and any civic versus ethnic based categorizations of nationalism need to be made with care²⁸. "Creedal nationalism" differentiates a specific subcategory of civic nationalism, one less vague than the broad conception of civic nationalism. Creedal nationalism is an ideology that defines what the most important values are within the society and political system, concentrating on a distilled essence of a set of ideals expressed in simple terms. For creedal nationalism, membership in the "nation" is contingent only on support of those ideals and not any shared language, racial, or religious characteristics often used by ethnicity-based nationalism. It is an ideology that has an inclusive version of defining the people who are allowed to be members of the nation by the criteria of supporting the values of the creed. Like any ideology, it acts as a view of what the role of government should be. In the case of the social movements of the United States in the 1820s, the "Jeffersonian Creed" of equality was used to support the ideal of equality as being an inherent characteristic of the American nation.

²⁴ P. Maier, *American...*, p. 197.

²⁵ See for a good discussion: M. Hroch, *Real and Constructed: the Nature of the Nation*, [in:] *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, edit. J. Hall, Cambridge 1998, pp. 91-106.

²⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1998.

²⁷ B. Bonikowski, P. DiMaggio, *Varieties of American Popular Nationalism*, "American Sociological Review" 2016, No. 81(5), pp. 949-980.

²⁸ R. Brubaker, *The Manichean Myth: Rethinking the Distinction Between Civic and Ethnic Nationalism*, [in:] *Nation and National Identity: the European Experience in Perspective*, edit. K. Hanspeter et.al, Zurich 1999, pp. 55-71.

This usage grew in intensity over the next decades, particularly amongst the women's rights movement and the abolitionist movement. Angelina Grimke, an American abolitionist and women's rights advocate, wrote a pamphlet published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1836 appealing to Christian women in the South and used Jefferson's Declaration and the Bible to support the anti-slavery movement. Her first proposition was that slavery was contrary to Jefferson's Declaration, with only the second proposition being that it was contrary to the Bible since the Bible was argued by many to condone slavery and was therefore the more complicated argument to make. She points out in the pamphlet that most of the Abolitionist books and papers draw primarily from the Bible and Jefferson's Declaration²⁹. The famous women's rights Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 passed a Declaration of Sentiments that explicitly mimicked Jefferson's Declaration, changing primarily the famous phrase to "all men and women are created equal" and detailing the list of sufferings of women under the tyranny of men. The abolitionist movement regularly pressed for a reading of Jefferson's Declaration as an inherent condemnation of slavery due to all men being created equal. The equally famous speech by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York (appearing in many literature textbooks) on July 4, 1852 condemned the celebration of the Declaration of Independence as rank "bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy" as long as slavery existed³⁰. This makes perfect sense today and did so in the 1850s. It would have made significantly less sense if referenced 75 years earlier to an act made to formalize the war in order to secure gunpowder and European alliances.

Historians point to the influence of Lincoln as solidifying a creedal nationalism based around the principles in Jefferson's Declaration as re-defined and reinterpreted by mid-nineteenth-century politics. The well published Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 helped solidify and popularize this more civic and Lockean style of nationalism based on an imagined community of principles rather than ethnicity. The debates and Lincoln's future speeches grew out of the fertile ground of the decades that preceded them. Ethnic-based nationalism remained popular and Douglas was correct in the debates that Lincoln was misinterpreting Jefferson's self-evident truth (what some at the time, responding to the mid-nineteenth-century interpretation, started calling self-evident lies). Lincoln's June 26, 1857 speech in Springfield, Illinois was objectively false when he claimed "the assertion that 'all men are created equal' was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration not for that, but for future use"³¹. The "assertion" was of explicit use in its historical context of an enlightenment philosophy denouncing the Divine Right of the British king to rule

²⁹ A. Grimke, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, [in:] *The Norton anthology of American Literature: 1820-1865*, 9th ed., New York 2017, pp. 783-784.

³⁰ M. Landy, S.M. Milkis, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

³¹ A. Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol. 2*, University of Michigan Digital Library Production Services 2001, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln2?view=toc> [access on: 12.08.2017].

over the colonies. Jefferson himself would have been aghast that a prominent and important bit of language in his beloved Declaration was being insulted as having no practical use at the time since he believed “that the highest test of a thing was its immediate practicality to the living generation”³².

The political work of building a creedal nationalism around aspirational principles of equality and liberty continued by Lincoln to such an extent that many twentieth-century historians assumed a simple answer to the question of how the Declaration and the “proposition” that all men are created equal took on a holy status in American political culture. The simple answer was that Lincoln did it³³. The more complex answer is that for decades a creedal nationalism was developing in conflict to more traditional styles of nationalism throughout the nineteenth century that was tied to more Lockean conceptions of liberty and political legitimacy.

Credal nationalism in conflict with ethnic nationalism

Nationalism as a popular ideology grew throughout the nineteenth century, in both the competing creedal and ethnic versions. The multiethnic demographics of the United States continued to grow, even when taking into account the mythologized overstatement of English Protestant origins. Even during the colonial era, the future United States had already become extremely multiethnic with immigrants from around Europe, slaves brought in from the Caribbean and Africa, and Native Americans being absorbed where not driven out or enslaved. In 1782, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a Frenchman living in the New World, answered the question “What is an American?” with the response:

I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. [...] [Americans are] individuals of all nations [...] melted into a new race of men [...]”³⁴.

Even for the direct descendants of the English immigrants, no shared ancient homeland existed to construct an American “nation” since their American homeland was not ancient, at most providing attachment to particular colonies.

Ethnic-based nationalism as an ideology competed with creedal nationalism as “Nativist” political movements defining the American nation as English Protestants descended from the colonial era gained in popularity over the nineteenth century, ethno-cultural identity providing the basis of membership in the nation. Although lacking the ancient homeland, such an imagining of the American nation was consistent with the nationalism movements gaining strength in Europe as populations in multi-

³² G. Wills, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

³³ See: P. Maier, *American...*, p. 197.

³⁴ J.H.S.J. de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, [in:] *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1820*, 9th ed., New York 2017, p. 638.

ethnic empires sought self-determination. Every burst of diversity in immigration was reacted to by another burst in Nativist nationalism, an ideology often associated with violence and denial of rights directed at the immigrants and anyone excluded from the ethnically bounded nation regardless of historical roots in the country. This has been a continuous process from the early origins of the country to the present. William Bradford, Governor of the Plymouth Colony established in 1620, was already complaining in 1642 about the undermining of the colony's culture by unworthy immigrants and inter-breeding with natives³⁵. In 2017, white nationalists marched at Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia chanting "You will not replace us" and "Jew will not replace us"³⁶.

Over time, building from the narrow foundations of an ethnically derived mythical first members of the American nation, nativist movements have needed to expand the ethnic boundaries of the American nation or be overwhelmed numerically and consequently politically in a democracy. The definition of who was a member of this nation tended to expand over long periods of time, eventually changing to include by the end of the twentieth century those who had initially been excluded such as Italians, Irish and Catholics. Extremist nativist movements remained, however, retaining their mythical ethnic boundaries.

The concept of a nation is socially constructed and therefore often rests on the construction of origin myths. The struggle over how to define the American nation is strongly dependent on competing myths. The creedal nationalism built upon the foundations of the myths of the Jefferson's Declaration remains in conflict with a deep tradition of ethnic nationalism. National identity in a state with no "natural" nation is not less conflictual, but rather just as sharply divided as found in other states as boundaries between groups are socially constructed³⁷. Many current political battles hinge on these constructions of national identity: is a citizen properly an American because they are a white Christian or is a citizen properly an American because they believe in certain principles of equality?

Conclusions

Brubaker and others have described nationalism as a domain of cognitive schemata, rather than as a specific type of ideology³⁸. How conceptions of the nation are used within a society can create more than one type of popular nationalism. Jefferson's Declara-

³⁵ W. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, [in:] *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1820*, 9th ed., New York 2017, pp. 155-166.

³⁶ H. Spencer, S.G. Stolberg, *White Nationalists March on University of Virginia*, "The New York Times" August 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/us/white-nationalists-rally-charlottesville-virginia.html> [access on: 18.07.2018].

³⁷ R. Brubaker, *Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism*, [in:] *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, edit. J. Hall, Cambridge 1998, pp. 272-306.

³⁸ R. Brubaker, M. Loveman, P. Stamatov, *Ethnicity as Cognition*, "Theory and Society" 2004, No. 33(1), pp. 31-64; B. Bonikowski, P. DiMaggio, *op. cit.*, p. 951.

tion was used as an ideological foundation within the domain of nationalism to create a modern creedal nationalism that lays claim to having always been present in our political system and therefore quintessentially American. The use of myth is common in nationalist ideologies. Myth certainly permeates the competing ethnic-based nationalism also found in the United States, drawing on a conception of an American homeland founded by a white English-speaking Christian nation (with the definition of “white” and “Christian” changing over time – even spreading now to “Judeo-Christian”). Myths can sometimes be quite useful, and I personally approve of an ideology that asserts equality for all human beings. However, creedal nationalism and ethno-cultural based conceptions of the American nation remain competing ideologies in the 21st century.

Within the catch-all party ideological foundations of the Democratic Party can be found creedal nationalism shaping views on immigration, civil rights and identity politics. Internal fighting within the Democratic Party over how to implement equality continues, but the creed of equality is constantly present. Within the catch-all party ideological foundations of the Republican Party can be found ethno-cultural based nationalism defining what is allowed as a real member of the American nation based on religion, ethnicity, and language. By the 21st century, with Hispanic-origin populations increasing in size, leaders of the Republican party attempted to convince their voters that Hispanics should be seen as ethnically American and therefore welcome in the ethnically defined nation. Sometimes violent and often extremist backlashes occurred within the party rejecting the expansion of the boundaries as having gone too far, leading to an ongoing fracture over the boundaries of ethnic nationalism in the party.

The central myth surrounding Jefferson’s Declaration devalues and misrepresents the struggle to achieve equality as a cultural element in American nationalism. To ascribe the 21st century end product of over 200 years of ideological and identity development and struggle to the enlightenment era political leaders at the founding of the United States is to lose the ability to analyze political change. It obscures the origins and development of the varieties of American nationalism that researchers are tracking³⁹. It is also damaging to those who still suffer the effects of inequality to suggest that the aspiration to civic equality was built into the conception of our nation from the beginning. Contrary to the mythical statements mentioned in the introduction, the US Constitution was not the fulfillment of the promise of equality for all. All national identities rely on myth building to some extent, but any analysis of the ideological development of nationalism needs to be aware of the boundaries of what is myth and what is not myth. The document and the famous words of equality that creedal nationalism claims as a foundational, even constitutional, document were an act of foreign policy propaganda during a time of desperate struggle in an ongoing war and used common enlightenment rhetoric lacking the meaning later generations placed on it.

³⁹ B. Bonikowski, P. DiMaggio, *op. cit.*, pp. 949-980.

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Abstract: The USA as a multinational country of immigrants is nevertheless a fertile ground for competing nationalist ideologies and the consequently competing myth-building that surrounds the construction of national identity. The myth of the 1776 Declaration of Independence as an important founding document for domestic politics in the United States continues to spread through popular culture and academic textbooks. The claim of the Jefferson's Declaration as an aspirational founding document helped establish a myth supporting creedal nationalism, but obscures the arc of the ideological debate over national identity.

Keywords: American nationalism, myth, Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, creedal nationalism

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