

Jefferson and King: Changes for America

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Both Thomas Jefferson in *The Declaration of Independence* and Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” advocate serious societal change, but they do so in very different ways. Both of these writers agree that in order to create this change, certain laws, which each writer considers unjust, must be broken, and the ensuing consequences must be dealt with. Jefferson’s intention in *The Declaration of Independence* is to force a separation of the colonies from Great Britain and to create a new government in the United States. King’s intention in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is to show that change is necessary and can be facilitated through the breaking of certain laws that are morally wrong. However, in *The Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson states that the change needed is likely to come through violent means, while in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King argues that this change should come through a peaceful tension, which would force both sides of the segregation movement to negotiate. In both the *Declaration of Independence* and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” the authors argue for change through the breaking of unjust laws, though they disagree on how change will be invoked and what types of laws can justifiably be broken.

The Declaration of Independence pushes for change through the violent means of war. Jefferson calls to “dissolve the political bands” between Great Britain and the colonies (215). Through this disbandment, Jefferson calls for the formation of a new government that will protect the people from tyranny. He states, “When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security” (Jefferson 216). In contrast, King in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” calls for

a transition of society and government through more peaceful means. Actions taken by King and his followers to foster this change are sit-ins, marches, and boycotts of certain stores and restaurants. King claims that “nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (223). King intends to create a crisis within the community to incite tension in the lives of everyone within the community. He believes that this tension will foster the negotiations that will end the segregation and race-related problems that he and his followers battle.

Both the Declaration of Independence and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” call to break the unjust laws which are responsible for the problems that the writers fight so vehemently against, either violently or peacefully. The Declaration of Independence describes an unjust law as something that violates a person’s “inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Jefferson 216). Jefferson says that whenever any law violates these inalienable rights of man, then the government should be repealed and changed. In the Declaration he states, “Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness” (Jefferson 216). In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King calls for the people to disregard the laws that he considers to be sinful and to violate the moral rules of Christianity. King writes the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as a response to eight clergymen who published a letter to the editor in the local newspaper, criticizing him for his actions; in his letter King attempts to show that he and the clergymen are all on the same side by quoting some famous theologians and saints. King quotes theologian Paul Tillich when he argues that “sin is separation” (226). In his letter, King also compares himself to the Apostle

Paul, citing his mission to spread the word to people who did not want to hear it, whether it is about Jesus, as Paul did, or about racism. King also refers to St. Thomas Aquinas: “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality” (227).

While both authors argue for change that involves breaking the laws that they consider unjust, they do not overlook the consequences of their actions. The changes that Jefferson and King are able to implement are greatly affected by the laws they break and the actions that they take. The changes included in the Declaration of Independence were at first hindered by the continuation of cruel and high taxation without representation. Some of the many taxes continued by the British government were the Stamp Act and the tea tax. The British government also attempted to suppress the change through violence against the colonists during the Revolutionary War, when the British military tried to quell the revolt and keep the colonies as part of the British Empire. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters also faced restrictions by government action, resulting in further arrests and jailing of protesters and supporters following demonstrations. These actors in the fight against segregation in Birmingham were denied a permit to demonstrate, which made their later protests illegal (King 221). The change that King argues for in his letter also created the situation that gave rise to further arrests and hate crimes against blacks and black supporters, as well as to more intense violence against them by the police (237).

The Declaration of Independence and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” both advocate serious change in society and in the government. The Declaration of Independence pushes for a change to form a new government, calling for a breaking of political ties with Great Britain,

which Jefferson knew would likely lead to war (Jefferson 219). In contrast, the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” calls for a change using peaceful tension. In King’s method of direct action, the non-violent demonstrations brought on by the African-American community would bring such tension into the air of the entire community that negotiations to ensure their rights would have to begin (King 222). Both documents argue that in order to invoke change, some unjust laws must be broken. These authors consider the laws to be unjust for very different reasons. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson seeks to abolish the laws which are a threat to a person’s “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” (216). In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King seeks to quash laws that he believes challenge the moral authority of Christianity. Today we can see that both the Declaration of Independence and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” have served as role models for changes in the government because both documents have been successful in creating reforms within the government of the United States of America. Though these two writers seek to bring about change through totally opposite means, they were both seeking to stop the government from infringing the people’s rights and to help make the nation a place of peace and equality for everyone.

Works Cited

- Jefferson, Thomas. “Declaration of Independence.” *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2007. 211-219.
- King Jr., Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2007. 220-237.