

The Declaration of Independence: “Property” vs. “Pursuit of Happiness”

To understand Thomas Jefferson’s choice of the phrase "pursuit of happiness," it is essential to understand both the political climate of the day and the philosophical basis upon which the *Declaration* was premised and the contemporary understanding of property.

When Jefferson and the other signers placed their signatures on the *Declaration of Independence*, they knew they were defying the world’s greatest and most feared military power. Each signer knew Great Britain would view their commitment to freedom as an act of treason. The signers understood that failure of the revolution could result in their execution or imprisonment. The *Declaration of Independence* was, in short, a self-imposed death warrant if the revolutionary effort was unsuccessful.

In the life or death atmosphere in which the *Declaration of Independence* emerged, it was critical that the case against King George III be made in a manner which would gain the support of world opinion. The support of other nations, particularly France, was extremely critical. The case against King George and the appeal for support from the world community of nations necessitated a document which was precise in its wording and concise in its articulation of the political issues involved....

Property then, in the understanding of Thomas Jefferson and the political philosophers of his day (John Locke and Algernon Sydney), **was everything from your name and reputation to your real estate. Your freedom of speech was your property. Your choice of religion and political affiliation was your property.**

Your intellectual achievements were your property. Patents and copyrights were issued to protect intellectual property. Your choice of how to make a living is your property. A business reputation built up by you is your property. Your choice of social association is your property.

John Adams, one of the signers of the *Declaration* and architect of the *Constitution*, well understood the premier position of private property in a free society. He stated, "The moment that idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the Laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence. **Property must be sacred or liberty cannot exist.**"

When we reread Jefferson’s words in the *Declaration*, in light of his understanding of property, his choice to use "pursuit of happiness" becomes clear. Your life is your property. Your liberty is your property. Your pursuit of happiness is your property. If Jefferson had used "property" instead of "pursuit of happiness," he would have been redundant.

The framers of our *Constitution* were quick to point out: **the only purpose of government is to protect property.** When these same men later drew up a *Constitution* and established a federal government, the emphasis was placed on clearly defining the amount of intrusion government would be allowed in the property of the citizen. They did this by setting forth the limits of those intrusions in seventeen enumerated powers expressed in Article I of the *Constitution*.

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