

The book, *Contested Truths*, by Daniel Rodgers, Professor of History at Princeton, gives a unique framework on which to build an understanding of American political life from Independence to the present. It is centered on key political words, their changing definitions over time and how they and the abstract ideas and slogans they represent, have been used with great effect in American politics. That subject is important in itself, but I am also looking for the Hand of God in all of this. Which, if any, of these developments were Christian or Biblical? Here is a brief summary of what Professor Rodgers writes, mostly in my own words:

Natural Rights

The key political Theme, in a phrase, leading up to and during the Revolution and in its aftermath was Natural Rights. However, Rights became many things to many people and the number of them was ever expanding. There was an "almost bewildering diversity" of them.

The challenge was to agree on their meanings and to narrow the list of them down.

The majority view was that Rights were instituted for "the common benefit", the "public weal [well-being]" and "solely for the common good".

"The notion of collective rights and public good ran deep".

There was suspicion of private desires, profits and privileges". Rodgers quotes a document of the time. from a biography of Thomas Paine,

"The right for every man to do what he pleases [is] a right which...is repugnant to the very principles on which society and civil government are founded." (p.58)

Distinction was made between rights that were alienable (which could be taken away) and inalienable.

But the latter were few and even these were not absolute.

The rights most often mentioned in various Bills of Rights were life, liberty, acquiring and possessing property and pursuing happiness. Often added was the right of the majority "to reform, alter or abolish" their Government in any manner judged to be for the common good of

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all. But even the inalienable Rights of Life or liberty could be forfeited by crime or treason and private property could be taxed, condemned or claimed for public uses.

Talk of Rights was divisive for many States and by the turn of the of the Century focus was increasingly on the words of the original Constitution as the Law of the Land. The Bill of Rights as a document was actually neglected for at least 50 years. However, the Declaration of Independence, although

not part of the Consitution, became a powerful political tool in the first half of the next (19th) Century.

By the 1830's, it became an important part of a revival of Natural Rights talk raised by marginal groups, mostly artisans and laborers (the lower working class) who believed they were not getting the same benefits of the new Nation as the land owners and powerful business owners were.

Labor was now a market commodity with its control out of the hand of farmers and wage earners.

A movement of radical outsider activists rose up against the powerful and the wealthy (mostly privileged white property and capital owning men).

The Activisits believed the republican priciples they had fought the War for were being betrayed. Their cry was for the Rights spelled out in the Declaration of Independence.

Equal rights meant not only "of" life, liberty and happiness but "for" life, liberty and happiness. The latter meant equal access to the rightful means of sustenance and education for happiness.

The most concern and debate was over "Property Rights" and "property" was expanded to include a person's time and labor.

The latter was an especially hot subject: a worker, the Reformers insisted, had the right to the benefits that came from his work.

This was a "natural" Right:

God had created and given the earth to all for the common, reasonably equal, wealth and benefit of all.

The enemies of this natural order were the Elite who were becoming wealthy and powerful through their banks, corporations and "wage slavery".

Ironically, Slave holders (and Slave labor) was not included in this subject by most people at the time.

The hot button issue for would-be Abolitionists of the period was not Property, but Liberty. It was this group of Crusaders who made the most of the Declaration. It became their Bible, their absolute Ultimate Authority on the subject of Liberty, higher than the Constitution.

Abraham Lincoln regarded it that way, as did the later 19th Century Leaders of the Feminist and Suffragette Movement for the Rights of Women.

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[The Declaration, the original Bill of Rights and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address are the defining, foundational documents for progressives of all types to this day.

They also use the 13th,14th and 15th Amendments of the Constitution, interpreted in the light of those Documents.]