America was founded upon ideals. As the British author G.K. Chesterton once famously said: “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Freedom from religious persecution, freedom from tyranny and oppression, and the democratic process were some of the core components of the creation of America. John. J. Bartlett’s representation of these ideals in “America guided by wisdom”[[2]](#footnote-2)depicts America as the spiritual successor to the Roman republic of old. Two leading ladies, presumed to be gods of justice and wisdom, are the obvious focal point. Wisdom and Justice seem to be conferring, discussing the fate of the flag right behind them. George Washington is depicted in an epic pose atop a horse, clearly a hero in the Greek sense, leading the country to military victories. As one glances towards the sky, the sun is breaking through the clouds, signifying the start of a new day: the birth of a new nation, and of democracy. 2 Democracy, as an idea, is a system of government that is representative of its population. Nothing denotes the birth of democracy in America quite like the “Declaration of Independence.” [[3]](#footnote-3) But, despite the strong claims made during some of the opening lines: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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,” 3 democracy did not expand for all Americans during this time period. During the rise of the early republic, Lady Wisdom decreed that democracy expand for landing owning white males, but it did not expand for minorities or women.

Democracy expanded for landing owning white males from the very start of the republic. Bartlett’s depiction of a victorious George Washington, in statue no less, is a start to the view of the white male as the *pater familias* of American democracy. All laws and legislation passed that dealt with citizenship and voting were created with this demographic in mind. The ‘three-fifths’ compromise demonstrates the difference between a man as evidenced in the early republic and a minority. Unlike men, women did not receive the right to vote in this country until 1920. Jefferson’s eponymous lines from the Declaration “We hold these truths to be self-evident…” are certainly with the white land owning male in mind. Bartlett’s drawing has a group of men approaching the shore from the water, eager to seek their fortune in this new country.

Bartlett’s idealist view of the formation of America sadly doesn’t apply to minorities. Democracy drastically failed to expand for minorities during the early republic. Slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person during the “Great Compromise” during the ratification of the Continental Congress. [[4]](#footnote-4) Even free African-Americans had to worry about legislation being passed that would revoke their freedom and make them slaves again. In Cato’s “the negroes who obtained freedom by the late act”[[5]](#footnote-5), Cato implores the editor:

I AM a poor negro, who with myself and children have had the good fortune to get my freedom, by means of an act of assembly passed on the first of March 1780, and should now with my family be as happy a set of people as any on the face of the earth, but I am told the assembly are going to pass a law to send us all back to our masters. Why dear Mr. Printer, this would be the cruelest act that ever a set of worthy good gentlemen could be guilty of. To make a law to hang us all, would be merciful, when compared with this law. 5

Minorities, especially blacks, had little to no rights. With the inability to vote, compounded with the worry of striking down legislation such as the Pennsylvania act or even the revoking of Dunmore’s proclamation, African-Americans were not accounted for in the early republic democracy. They are certainly not depicted in Bartlett’s “America guided by Wisdom” in any capacity, and even members of the founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson looked down upon the black populace of early America. In “Notes on the State of Virginia”[[6]](#footnote-6), Jefferson speaks to his thoughts on the inferiority of the minorities (blacks in particular), he pens: “Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid;”. 6 Jefferson continues, stating: “the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”6 Despite Jefferson’s assertion in the Declaration “that all men are created equal”3, he doesn’t seem to agree with that sentiment when it comes to minorities.

Despite Bartlett’s depiction of Wisdom and Justice as women, democracy also failed to expand for women during the early republic. Abigail Adams, in a letter to her husband John Adams, writes: “I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Abigail is imploring her husband to set forth better laws and regulations when it comes to the treatment of women in America. John’s response however, is anything but promising for the plight of women. He writes: “As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. … Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The plight of early republic women is also described in Alexis de Toqueville’s “Democracy in America”.[[9]](#footnote-9) de Toqueville claims that men and women are physically and morally different than each other. In fact, he states:

In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different. American women never manage the outward concerns of the family or conduct a business or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields or to make any of those laborious efforts which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule.9

De Toqueville’s view of women, and the sphere they are relegated to, seems to coincide with John Adams view of women’s place in America. Bartlett’s idealist depiction of women as leading ladies would more than likely be seen as a metaphorical one, instead of a realistic depiction.

America was founded upon ideals. Democracy on the scale of early republic America was unheard of since the Roman Empire. Despite the fact that democracy was a founding component of America, all democracy was not created equal. Land owning white males enjoyed the privilege of citizenship, the ability to vote, to elect a representative government, and much more. The inferiority of minorities and women in early republic America is not represented in Bartlett’s “America Guided by Wisdom”. There is no mention of either category in Jefferson’s “Declaration”, either. However, the bias and restrictions placed upon these two groups of people were certainly real. Bartlett’s piece is an idealistic, but not realistic, look at the founding of this great nation.

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Transcription

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.–That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, –That 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 affect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But 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.”

““We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” -All men are created by God to be equal in mind, body and soul to each other.

“that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” -Man as a whole is due certain rights: the right to live, the right to live free, and the right to pursue one’s desires and dreams.

“That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, –That 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.” -The government set up by man, who consent to be governed in this way, if they (the government) do not abide by the above stated rights, it is the duty of the people of that land to change the government in a manner that is satisfactory, either through legislation or revolution.

“Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes;” -The overthrowing of a government is not a small thing, so the rights of the people to overthrow a government in such a manner should not be taken lightly, and certainly not exercised over some small issue.

“accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed” -Experience has taught us that mankind is predisposes to suffering through evil rather than abolishing the evil that they have become used to.

“But 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.” –When the above mentioned suffering becomes tyrannical, it is the right and duty of the people to overthrow such a government, and to safeguard the future for our children, and our children’s children.

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