

The Declaration of Independence and its Legacy

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Level **930L**



The signing of the Declaration of Independence of the U.S. on July 4, 1776, was painted by artist Armand-Dumaresq around 1873. The painting was donated by art dealer Sam Salz to President John Kennedy as thanks for the U.S. helping him escape the Nazis when he was growing up in Poland. The painting hangs over the fireplace in the White House Cabinet Room.

The moment had finally come. Too much had happened between the colonial leaders and the British crown to go back. More and more colonists felt deprived by the British not only of their money and their liberties, but their lives as well. Bloodshed had begun over a year ago in 1775 in the Revolutionary War. There seemed little chance of a ceasefire.

It was time for a formal break with England and time to declare independence.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution to the Continental Congress that declared the 13 colonies "free and independent states." Congress did not act on the resolution immediately. A vote was set for early July.

In the meantime it seemed appropriate to explain such a bold act. A committee including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson was selected to choose the careful wording. Such a document must be persuasive to many parties. Americans might read it and join

the patriot cause. Sympathetic Britons would read it and might urge calm from their king. Other countries would read it and maybe aid the U.S. colonial military. They might, that is, if the words were convincing. Committee members agreed that Jefferson was the best writer. The others would advise him.

How the declaration was laid out

The declaration is divided into three main parts. The first is a simple statement of intent. Jefferson's words echo even today. Phrases like "all men are created equal" and "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" have come from the lips of Americans of all ages. They are in the first section that outlines the principles of the leaders.

The next section is a list of injustices, the reasons the colonies thought independence was necessary. King George III was guilty of "repeated injuries" that intended to establish "tyranny" in North America. He had "plundered our seas, burned our towns and destroyed the lives of our people."

The final paragraph officially ended ties with Britain. It also shows today's readers the courage of each delegate who signed. They were now officially guilty of treason and would be sentenced to hang if taken before a royal court.

Debate in the Congress followed, and Jefferson watched painfully as the other delegates tweaked his writing. Finally on July 4, 1776, the colonies approved the document. The vote was 12-0, with the New York delegation abstaining from the vote. As president of the Congress, John Hancock scrawled his famous signature across the bottom and history was made. If the American effort was successful, they would be hailed as heroes, and if it failed, they would be hanged as traitors.

The importance of the declaration

Why was the Declaration of Independence so special? Why do Americans continue to celebrate its announcement as the birthday of the United States, July 4, 1776? While that date might just mean fireworks to some today, what did the declaration mean when it was written in 1776?

For one thing, the declaration was a legal document. It announced to the world the reasons that led the 13 colonies to separate from the British Empire.

The declaration was not only legalistic, but practical too. Americans hoped to get money or military support from other countries that were traditional enemies of the British. However, these practical purposes are not why the declaration is remembered today as an expression of the ideals of the American Revolution.

The declaration's most famous sentence reads, "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."

How the declaration influenced history

This ideal of equality has influenced American history. Women's rights activists at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 wrote their "Declaration of Sentiments" in the same terms as the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," they said, "that all men and women are created equal." Similarly, the African-American anti-slavery activist David Walker challenged

white Americans in 1829 to "See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language?" Walker dared America to live up to its self-proclaimed ideals, asking, if all men were created equal, then why was slavery legal?

Jefferson is an example of the contradictions of the time. Although he was the chief author of the declaration, he also owned slaves, as did many of his fellow signers. They did not see full equality as a positive goal. Nevertheless, Jefferson was prepared to criticize the slave trade more than most of his fellow leaders. His original draft of the declaration included a passage that blamed King George for allowing the slave trade to flourish. This part was deleted by a vote of the Continental Congress.

An extreme statement for its time

The signers of the declaration described how Americans would relate to their government. The declaration suggests that the purpose of government is to secure the people's rights and that government gets its power from the consent of the people. It goes on to say that if that consent is betrayed, it is the right of the people to alter or end their government.

When the declaration was written, this was an extreme statement. The idea that the people could dismiss a leadership based on the power of a king and replace it with a government based on the consent of the people was revolutionary.

The signers thought of "the people" mostly as being white males. However, they stated principles that are still American ideals.

Quiz

- 1 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.
In the first two paragraphs, the author ____.
- (A) suggests that the colonists were working hard to find resolutions before declaring independence
 - (B) explains solutions that the British crown tried using to keep colonists from signing the declaration
 - (C) describes the tension between the colonies and Britain that caused them to declare independence
 - (D) outlines the reasons why the declaration caused violence and bloodshed in the colonies
- 2 Which section of the article highlights the idea that other groups have used the language of the declaration to fight for their rights?
- (A) "How the declaration was laid out"
 - (B) "The importance of the declaration"
 - (C) "How the declaration influenced history"
 - (D) "An extreme statement for its time"
- 3 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that the founding fathers were risking their lives by signing the Declaration of Independence?
- (A) King George III was guilty of "repeated injuries" that intended to establish "tyranny" in North America.
 - (B) They were now officially guilty of treason and would be sentenced to hang if taken before a royal court.
 - (C) It announced to the world the reasons that led the 13 colonies to separate from the British Empire.
 - (D) It goes on to say that if that consent is betrayed, it is the right of the people to alter or end their government.
- 4 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].
- It was time for a formal break with England and time to declare independence.*
- How does this sentence contribute to the development of the main ideas of the article?
- (A) by highlighting different, conflicting ideas
 - (B) by introducing a key influencer of the ideas in the article
 - (C) by challenging the other important ideas in the article
 - (D) by stating one of the main ideas of the article