

The Declaration of Independence

TEXT

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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).”

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . .

The colonies were breaking their relationship with Britain.

Separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them . . .

America was a colony, ruled by Britain, which was a country. The declaration stated that the United States should have the same status as Britain.

Jefferson believed firmly in God, but not necessarily the Judeo-Christian God. His religious views were shaped by the Enlightenment, which often merged God and Nature into one being.

A decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes . . .

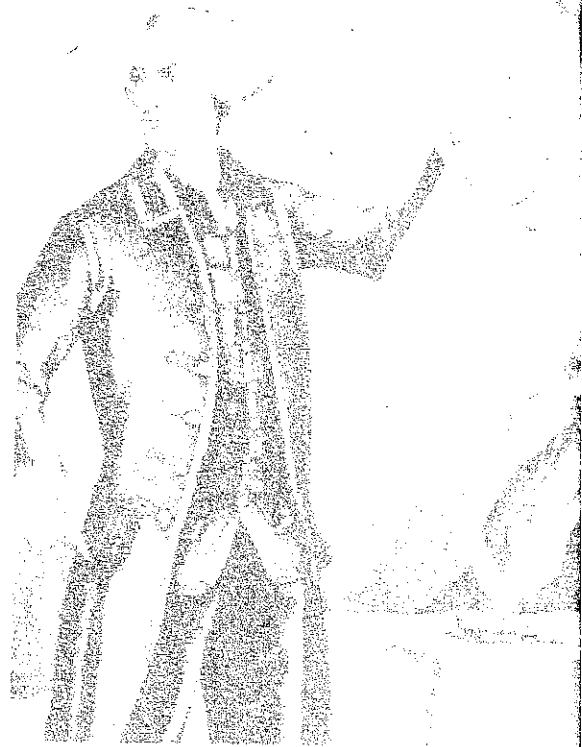
Or, in fewer words: “We don’t have to write out all these reasons for splitting from you, England. We could just fight. But we’re trying to do the right thing.”

All men are created equal . . .

The United States is the first government in the world to be founded on this amazing idea. Of course, it didn’t seem to apply to the 500,000 slaves in America, or to women, or to Native Americans. Still, it represented a leap forward in political and moral thought.

To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . .

The declaration stated forcefully that governments don't grant rights; they should protect peoples' rights. Furthermore, the government gets its power and legitimacy from the will of the people, not from God, tradition, or military power. These ideas come directly from **John Locke** and **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**.



WHAT'S NEXT?

That's just the beginning. What else does the declaration declare?

The Declaration of Independence is a declaration (we are the United States!) and a break-up letter. It basically says, "We're breaking up with you, King George, because you're a tyrant."

The declaration goes on to list "grievances" (all the things King George had done wrong). Here, instead of "you never bought me flowers" and "I never liked your haircut," it accuses King George of "cutting off [our] trade" and "imposing taxes on us without our consent." In all, it lists twenty-seven things that King George messed up.

The declaration ends by actually naming the new country: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the **United States of America** . . . solemnly publish and

declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown."

Jefferson hates slavery?

Though a slaveholder himself, Jefferson's original draft of the Constitution blamed King George for the slave trade, which Jefferson called "execrable commerce." The delegates quickly deleted this passage, not only because most of them supported slavery, but also because blaming the slave trade on King George was totally false. Why Jefferson would criticize a system he supported (and that supported him) is unclear. It's typically written off as simple hypocrisy.

AMERICA SPEAKS

"What do we mean by the American Revolution?... The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution."

—John Adams, Letter to H. Niles (February 13, 1818)