

Name: _____

Class: _____

The Declaration of Independence

By Thomas Jefferson
1776

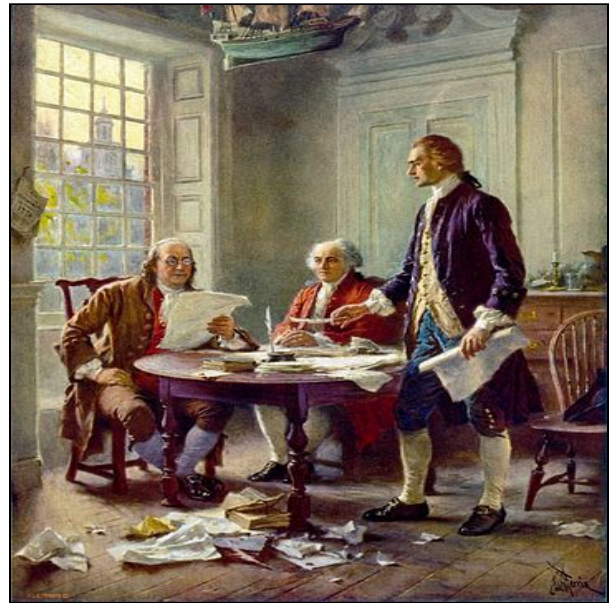
After a series of laws meant to punish the American colonists (including the taxation of paper products and forcing colonists to host British soldiers in their homes) representatives from the thirteen colonies came together to declare independence from Great Britain. The following is the document they wrote and signed on July 4, 1776. This text also contains some outdated and offensive language that was often considered acceptable at the time the text was published. As you read, identify the various reasons why the colonies decided to declare their independence.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

- [1] 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 of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel¹ them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed² 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, deriving³ 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. Prudence,⁴ indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient⁵ 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



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1. **Impel (verb)** to drive, force, or urge (someone) to do something
2. **Endow (verb)** to provide with a quality, ability, or right
3. **Derive (verb)** to take or get from a source
4. **Prudence (noun)** careful judgment that allows someone to avoid danger or risks
5. **Transient (adjective)** lasting only for a short time

accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces⁶ a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism,⁷ it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

- [5] He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation,⁸ have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions⁹ within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

- [10] He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

6. to indicate or reveal

7. the exercise of cruel, absolute power

8. **Annihilation** (*noun*) the complete destruction of something

9. a violent social or political upheaval

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

- [15] He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us¹⁰

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent

- [20] For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever

- [25] He has abdicated¹¹ Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries¹² to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy¹³ scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

10. forcing colonists to provide housing for British soldiers

11. to remove

12. a professional soldier hired to serve in a foreign army

13. **Perfidy** (*noun*) betrayal or untrustworthiness

He has excited domestic insurrections¹⁴ amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages,¹⁵ whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

[30] In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress¹⁶ in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity,¹⁷ and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow¹⁸ these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.¹⁹ We must, therefore, acquiesce²⁰ in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved²¹ from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

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14. **Insurrection (noun)** a violent uprising against an established authority or government
 15. "Indian Savage" is an archaic and derogatory term for someone of Native American descent. This term is now considered outdated and offensive.
 16. **Redress (noun)** remedy or compensation for a wrong
 17. **Magnanimous (adjective)** very generous or forgiving, especially towards a rival or less powerful person
 18. to deny responsibility for
 19. close relationship or connection, especially by blood or shared ancestry
 20. **Acquiesce (verb)** to agree to or accept something by staying silent or by not arguing
 21. **Absolve (verb)** to make free from guilt or responsibility

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best expresses the author's main purpose in this document?
 - A. to end the war between the colonies and Great Britain by declaring a revolution
 - B. to criticize the King of England's reign over the colonies and advocate for his removal from power
 - C. to declare the thirteen colonies free of Great Britain's rule and illustrate why they are declaring independence
 - D. to denounce the colonists' treatment as second-class citizens and advocate for better treatment from the king

2. PART A: Which of the following statements best describes how the author views the relationship between the people and their government?
 - A. The government grants the people inalienable rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
 - B. The people have the right to change or remove their government if it infringes upon their rights and no longer represents their interests.
 - C. The people have the right to change their government whenever they wish, even for small offenses, because they give it power.
 - D. The government is preserved because the people are invested in making sure their rights are secure from change.

3. PART B: Which of the following quotes from paragraph 2 best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "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"
 - B. "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed"
 - C. "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"
 - D. "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes"

4. How do paragraphs 3-29 contribute to the key concept of the colonies' independence from Great Britain?
 - A. This section lists the king's numerous acts of injustices in order to set an example for the newly established U.S. government.
 - B. This section highlights how different the king's behavior is from those of the founding fathers, who value freedom over power.
 - C. This section is included to discourage the king from continuing such offenses against the colonists, who have declared independence.
 - D. This section details the king's numerous acts of injustice, justifying the colonies' decision to declare independence from Great Britain.

5. How does the author use paragraphs 30-31 to refine their ideas? Cite evidence in your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What are the commonalities present in the list of complaints against the King? What do you think motivated the king to act in these ways, based on your reading and your understanding of American and British history?
2. Do you think this declaration is a uniquely American document? How does this document set the groundwork a national American identity? What values or ideas are present even today in American culture and legislature?