

Declaration of Independence

(July 4, 1776)

CONTEXT

The Declaration of Independence was drafted by Thomas Jefferson and revised and adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. It explained why the colonies wanted to break away from British rule. It also made a clear statement about the source of rights and purpose of government. The document states that all people have natural rights that cannot be taken away—such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It asserted that the purpose of government is to protect the rights of the people and that governments get their power from the consent of the people. If a government becomes abusive over a long period of time, the people have the right to change or replace it. The Declaration lists complaints against King George III to show why he became a tyrant and why independence was necessary. The Declaration of Independence became a powerful symbol of freedom and self-government in American and world history.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Consent of the governed

The idea that governments get their power from the people they rule.

Tyranny

Cruel or unfair use of power.

Oppression

Unfair treatment or control by those in power.

Petition

A formal request to a government for change or help.

Redress

To correct or fix a wrong.

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The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, 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 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**, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Evtug bs gur Crbcyr 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, 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.—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.

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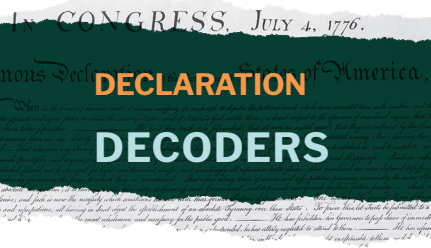
- He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.
- He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.
- 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 kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.
- He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

In every stage of these **Oppressions** We have **Petitioned for Redress** 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, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They

too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce 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 Absolved 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.



Letter From Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee

(May 8, 1825)

CONTEXT

In this letter written at the end of his life, Thomas Jefferson reflects on why the Declaration of Independence was written. He explains that its purpose was not to be original or invent new ideas, but to clearly show the world why the colonies had to become independent from Britain. Jefferson emphasizes that the Declaration represented the shared beliefs of the American people at the time. He explained that the patriots were arguing for their rights and explaining why they should be free of an oppressive British government.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Contravening

Acting against or breaking a law or rule.

Redress

To correct or fix a wrong.

Tribunal

A court or authority that judges a dispute.

Assent

Agreement or approval.

Harmonizing

Bringing ideas into agreement or making them work together.

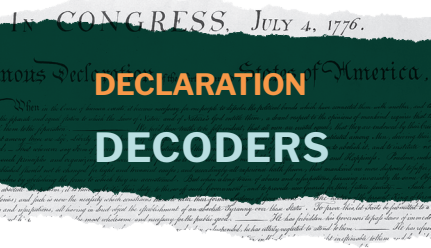
TEXT

“...with respect to our rights and the acts of the British government **contravening** those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American Whigs thought alike on these subjects.

When forced therefore to resort to arms for **redress**, an appeal to the **tribunal** of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence: not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject; in terms so plain and firm, as to command their **assent**, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we were compelled to take.

Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.

All its authority rests then on the **harmonizing** sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversations, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.”



Seneca Falls Convention, Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

CONTEXT

The Declaration of Sentiments was adopted at the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women’s rights convention in the United States. It was modeled on the Declaration of Independence and stated that women, like men, have equal natural and civil rights. The document lists ways that women had been treated unfairly, including not being allowed to vote, having fewer property rights, and being denied education. The women claimed that they should enjoy the same equality as men because of the universal truth of equality for all.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Inalienable rights

Rights that cannot be taken away, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Consent of the governed

The idea that governments get their power from the people they rule.

Usurpation

Taking power or rights unfairly or by force.

Disfranchisement

Being denied the right to vote.

TEXT

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume a position different from that which they have hitherto **occupied, but one to which the laws of nature** entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed **by their Creator** with certain **inalienable rights**; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the **consent of the governed**. Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a 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, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown 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 duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and **usurpations** on the part of man toward woman, having the direct object of establishing an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

- He has never permitted her to exercise her **inalienable right** to the elective franchise.
- He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
- He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.
- He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education.
- He has endeavored, in every way, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now, in view of this entire **disfranchisement** of one-half the people of this country, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them **as citizens** of the United States.

Abraham Lincoln

Gettysburg Address (1863)

CONTEXT

Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address during the Civil War at a ceremony to honor soldiers who died in battle. He reminded Americans that the country was founded on the idea that all people are created equal. Lincoln said that the nation was being tested to see if it could continue to live up to these ideals. He called it a “proposition” because Confederates denied that Blacks were equal and went to war to leave the country. He called on the living to dedicate themselves to winning a Union victory in the war to make the nation a place where freedom and equality are real for everyone.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Civil war

A war between groups within the same country.

Endure

To persist or last over time.

Consecrate

To make something holy or dedicate it to an important purpose.

Devotion

Strong love, loyalty, or dedication to a cause.

TEXT

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great **civil war**, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long **endure**. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate – we can not **consecrate** – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased **devotion** to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Theodore Roosevelt

New Nationalism (1910)

CONTEXT

In this speech, former President Theodore Roosevelt talks about the importance of making the Declaration of Independence real for all people. He wrote this document during the industrial age of the early 1900s when wealth was very unequal. He argues that having equal opportunities and fairness in government and the economy is key to a successful democracy. Roosevelt emphasizes that he thinks the government should regulate the economy to guarantee equality. He also calls for laws to protect workers, children, and citizens from unfair treatment by corporations.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Uplift

Improvement of people's lives or society.

Democracy

A government in which people have a say in decisions, usually by voting.

Equality of opportunity

Everyone having a fair chance to succeed.

Privilege

Special advantages that some people have over others.

Civil life

Life as a citizen participating in a community or country.

TEXT

We come here today to commemorate one of the epoch-making events of the long struggle for the rights of man--the long struggle for the **uplift** of humanity. Our country--this great Republic--means nothing unless it means the triumph of a real **democracy**, the triumph of popular government, and, in the long run, of an economic system under which each man shall be guaranteed the opportunity to show the best that there is in him.

There have been two great crises in our country's history: first, when it was formed, and then, again, in the time of stress and strain which culminated in the Civil War. If this Republic had been founded only to be split asunder, then the judgment of the world would have been that Washington's work was not worth doing. The men who fought in the Civil War justified the wisdom of Washington and carried to achievement the high purpose of Abraham Lincoln.

In name we had the Declaration of Independence in 1776; but we gave the lie by our acts to the words of the Declaration until 1865; and words count for nothing except in so far as they represent acts. I care for the great deeds of the past chiefly as spurs to drive us onward in the present.

In every wise struggle for human betterment one of the main objects has always been to achieve **equality of opportunity**. In our day, it appears as the struggle of freemen to gain and hold the right of self-government as against special interests, who twist the methods of free government into machinery for defeating the popular will. The essence of the struggle is to equalize opportunity, destroy **privilege**, and give to every citizen the highest possible value both to himself and to the commonwealth. That is nothing new. All I ask in **civil life** is what you fought for in the Civil War.

Practical equality of opportunity will have two great results. First, every man will have a fair chance to reach the highest point his capacities can carry him. Second, equality of opportunity means that the commonwealth will get from every citizen the highest service of which he is capable. I stand for the square deal. When I

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say I want a square deal for the poor man, I do not mean for the man who will not work for himself. If a man who has had a chance will not make good, then he has got to quit.

The people of the United States must control the mighty commercial forces which they have called into being. No man should receive a dollar unless it has been fairly earned. Every dollar received should represent a dollar's worth of service rendered. We need laws to regulate child labor, work for women, better safety in industry, and proper education for daily life and work. We need to enforce justice against violence, corporate greed, and corruption, and remember justice for all sides.

The object of government is the welfare of the people. Just in proportion as the average man and woman are honest, capable of sound judgment and high ideals, active in public affairs, just so far may we count our civilization a success. We must have a moral awakening and also social and economic laws to support it. In the last analysis, the most important elements in any man's career must be the sum of those qualities which make him a good citizen.

Martin Luther King Jr.

“I Have a Dream” (1963)

CONTEXT

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. called for racial equality and justice in the United States. He reminded Americans that the Declaration of Independence promised rights to everyone, but that Black Americans still faced inequality under segregation. Because Blacks had waited centuries for equality, he calls “all men are created equal” as a promissory note. He wants to cash in that note and make the principle of equality a reality for all. King imagined a free society where people would be judged by their character, not the color of their skin, and where all Americans could share equally in freedom and opportunity.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Emancipation Proclamation

The 1863 order by Abraham Lincoln that freed enslaved people in the Confederate states.

Segregation

The separation of people based on race.

Discrimination

Unfair treatment of a person or group because of race, gender, or other traits.

Promissory note

A promise that someone will get something owed; King compares it to the promise of equality.

TEXT

“Five score years ago a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the **Emancipation Proclamation**. This momentous decree is a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But 100 years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still badly crippled by the manacles of **segregation** and the chains of **discrimination**. One hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a **promissory note** to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . .

I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream . . .

I have a dream today . . .”