

Declaration of Independence: Summary

It has become necessary for the 13 colonies to separate from Great Britain. These 13 colonies have the right to become a nation as legitimate as any other nation. Additionally, it is important to explain to the public, including those in other nations, why this declaration of independence is being made.

This declaration is based on certain truths. All men are meant to be equal and to have certain rights ("unalienable rights") that the government should never take away. These rights include "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Governments exist to support the rights of men. Governments exist only through the power of the people that they represent. When a government fails to grant rights to the people and removes the involvement of the people, the people have the right to change their government in a way that will allow for their unalienable rights to be protected. Governments should not be overthrown for trivial reasons; it is not typical for people to change a system that they are accustomed to. However, when the people have suffered many abuses under the control of a totalitarian leader, they not only have the right but the duty to overthrow that government.

Commentary

The *Declaration of Independence* is important because it inspired many revolutionary efforts throughout the world and contributed to Americans' understanding of their values as a new nation. The introduction, called the preamble, to the *Declaration of Independence* is especially important because it builds connections between philosophical theory and practical politics, expresses the fundamental values of the new American government, and also appeals to other nations to accept the new nation.

The introduction relies heavily on the philosophical and political ideas of the Enlightenment period of 18th century Europe, including the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and, most particularly, John Locke. Locke believed that humans, by nature, had the right to protection of life, health, liberty and possessions. Jefferson altered this slightly when he claims the unalienable rights include "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Locke also strongly opposed the divine right of kings--which held that kings held absolute power because they were placed on their throne by God--and insisted that the people had the right to consent to their government and that the power of law making resides with the people. Jefferson included this theory when he writes "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Jefferson's declaration helped to put Locke's philosophies into the realm of real-world politics. Many revolutions that occurred after the American Revolution cited Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* as justification in overthrowing a corrupt and dictatorial power.

The introduction to the *Declaration of Independence* also is important for the ways it contributed to Americans' understanding of their rights as citizens. Americans continue to believe that the phrase "all men are created equal" is

a fundamental "law" in the country. While this phrase was included in the introduction to the declaration, it appears nowhere else in official documents defining rights granted under the U.S. Government. The *Declaration of Independence* holds no legal authority in our country, yet it continues to be cited as the foundation for American equality. Various groups throughout history have criticized American "equality", referring to the introduction of the declaration for support. Critics point to Jefferson's contradictory message regarding equality in reference to slavery. Although Jefferson stated that all men are created equal and have the right to liberty, he ran a large plantation and was a slaveholder. Other critics point to the use of the word "men" as excluding women citizens. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention used Jefferson's format and style to draft The *Declaration of Sentiments*, a document declaring women's unfair treatment by the U.S. government and by society. Both as a source for debate about equality and as a definition of the ideological foundation of the new nation, the introduction to the *Declaration* played a crucial role in defining American values and laws.

List of Abuses and Usurpations

Summary

The colonies have suffered 27 at the hands of the King George III. Each of these abuses has been directed at the colonies for the purpose of establishing a tyrannical government in North America. Jefferson claims that the colonists have patiently suffered these abuses and that it is now time to expose these abuses to the nations of the world.

The first 12 abuses involve King George III's establishment of a tyrannical authority in place of representative government. The foundation of representative government is the power of the people to make laws for the public good. King George III interfered with that process by rejecting legislation proposed by the colonies, dissolving colonial bodies of representation, replacing colonial governments with his appointed ministers, and interfering with the naturalization of citizens in new regions. King George III extended his tyrannical control by interfering with the objective judicial processes and the civil rights of the colonists. King George III prevented the establishment of judicial powers in the colonies and made judges dependent on him for their jobs and salaries. King George III further established tyrannical control by maintaining a strong military presence under his direct command. The King is a tyrant, because he keeps standing armies in the colonies during a time of peace, makes the military power superior to the civil government, and forces the colonists to support the military presence through increased taxes.

Abuses 13 through 22 describe the involvement of parliament in destroying the colonists' right to self-rule. The king has "combined with others" to subject the colonists to legislation passed without colonial input or consent. Legislation has been passed to quarter troops in the colonies, to shut off trade with other parts of the world, to levy taxes without the consent of colonial legislatures, to take away the right to trial by jury, and to force colonists to be tried in England.

Additionally, legislation has established absolute rule in a nearby area, taken away the authority of colonial governments, and forbidden further legislation by colonial governments.

The last 5 abuses, 23 through 27, refer to specific actions that the King of Great Britain took to abandon the colonies and to wage war against them. The King has attempted to suppress the colonial rebellion through violence and military means. He sent the British military to attack colonists, burn their towns, attack their ships at sea, and destroy the lives of the people. He hired foreign mercenaries to fight against the colonies. He kidnapped American sailors to force them into British military service, refused to protect the colonies from Native American attack, and has caused colonists to fight against each other.

Past Actions of Colonists

Up until this declaration, colonists have used non-violent means, such as petitions, to protest the abuses of King George III. Each attempt to request peaceful negotiations was met by neglect and more abuse.

Additionally, colonists tried to appeal to Parliament and other British citizens for help. These attempts were ignored. Colonists appealed to British citizens' sense of justice, to their shared heritage and culture, and to their economic connection. These attempts failed, however, and the colonies have no other choice but to declare separation. In doing so, the new separate nation will view British citizens as enemies during wartime, and as friends in peacetime.

Conclusion and Definition of a New Government

Summary

The Second Continental Congress represents the people of the new nation called the United States of America. This declaration informs all the people of the world that the 13 united colonies are free from British rule and any political connections with Great Britain. The declaration also serves to appeal to the people of the world to understand the reasons why this separation is justifiable.

The independent states claim the power to levy war, make peace, make alliances with foreign nations, conduct trade, and to do anything else that independent states have the right to do.

The newly independent states believe that God will protect them in their venture to establish a just government. The citizens of each colony have pledged their loyalty and lives to the cause of the newly independent nation.