



Declaration of Independence (1776)

The Declaration of Independence was issued on July 4, 1776, by the Continental Congress, a revolutionary government composed of delegates (all white, all male) from thirteen of Britain's North American colonies. The declaration was drafted principally by Thomas Jefferson, then a churchgoing Anglican, whose religious beliefs are frequently described as deistic.

The draft that Jefferson—a slaveholder—submitted to Congress included a section condemning slavery, but Congress cut that section from the final document. In the edited excerpts from the Declaration of Independence that are presented here, the paragraphs on slavery have been inserted at the point where they appeared in the draft, with a shaded background to distinguish them from the text that Congress actually adopted.

[“We hold these truths”]

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 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, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes [...] 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.

[“A history of repeated injuries”]

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 dissolved representative houses, repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his

invasions on the rights of the people. [...]

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states, for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands. [...]

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies without the consent of our legislatures. [...]

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 us.
- for protecting [those troops], 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. [...]
- for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring 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.^a
- 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.

He has abdicated government here by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is, at this time, transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun, with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely

^a A reference to the Quebec Act of 1774, which Parliament passed to conciliate the French colonists who had come under British rule as a result of the Seven Years' War. The act partially reinstated French law in Quebec; allowed the Catholic Church to operate there, with legal power to exact tithes; and abolished a Protestant test oath, thereby allowing Catholics to hold government office. Under the act, Quebec was administered by a royally appointed governor, without a legislative assembly. The act also expanded Quebec's borders southward to include the territory between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River—territory that some of the thirteen colonies claimed as theirs.

paralleled in the most barbarous ages and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation. [...] He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

[The draft of the declaration that was submitted to the Continental Congress included at this point the following text, which Congress cut from the final version of the declaration.]

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain.

Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.

And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished dye, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them, thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

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. [...]

[“We therefore declare...”]

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.

Sources: Dunlap Broadside [Declaration of Independence], July 4, 1776, Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, US National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/301682>. Unrestricted use.

Draft paragraphs about slavery excerpted from “Thomas Jefferson, June 1776, Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence,” Thomas Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjtj.mtjbib000156>. Made available for noncommercial, educational, and research purposes.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings added by Duffy. En-dash bullets and additional paragraph breaks inserted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation modernized or Americanized. Ampersands spelled out. Underlining of words in the manuscript draft omitted. Several instances of all caps for emphasis in the broadside omitted, but a single instance retained from the manuscript draft.

These edited excerpts from the draft and published versions of the declaration are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publications listed above.



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