

The Declaration of Independence: How Did It Happen? What Does It Say/Mean?

In the early 1700s, more and more colonists became convinced that Parliament intended to take away their freedom. In fact, Americans saw a pattern of increasing oppression and corruption happening all around the world. Parliament was determined to bring its unruly American subjects to heel.

Britain began to prepare for war in early 1775. The first fighting broke out in April in Massachusetts. In August, the King declared the colonists “in a state of open and avowed rebellion.” For the first time, many colonists began to seriously consider cutting ties with Britain.

The publication of Thomas Paine’s stirring pamphlet *Common Sense* in early 1776 lit a fire under this previously unthinkable idea. The movement for independence was now in full swing.

The Declaration of Independence was designed for multiple audiences: the King, the colonists, and the world. It was also designed to multitask. Its goals were to rally the troops, win foreign allies, and to announce the creation of a new country. The underlying message in the Declaration encourages others to join the cause, and, by doing that, they join humankind’s fight against tyranny.

The introductory sentence states the Declaration’s main purpose, to explain the colonists’ right to revolution. In other words, “to declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” Congress had to prove the legitimacy of its cause. It had just defied the most powerful nation on Earth. It needed to motivate foreign allies to join in.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. Two days later, July 4, 1776, it ratified the text of the Declaration of Independence. John Dunlap, official printer to Congress, worked through the night to set the Declaration in type and print approximately 200 copies.

These copies, known as the Dunlap Broad sides, were sent to various committees, assemblies, and commanders of the Continental troops. The Dunlap Broad sides weren’t signed, but John Hancock’s name, as President of the Congress, appears in large type at the bottom.

The first official British response came from Vice Admiral Lord Richard Howe and his brother General William Howe, Commander of British forces in North America, who scolded the “misguided Americans” and “their extravagant and inadmissible Claim of Independence”.

Preamble

The following is the line of the Declaration contemporary Americans know best: “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.”

These stirring words were designed to convince Americans to put their lives on the line for the cause. Separation from the mother country threatened their sense of security, economic stability, and identity. The preamble sought to inspire and unite them through the vision of a better life.

List of Grievances

The longest part of the Declaration begins with “He has refused his Assent to Laws” and goes on to list the unfair actions of the British king and Parliament. (NPS) The list of 27 complaints against King George III (although he is not named) constitute the proof of the right to rebellion. Congress cast “the causes which impel them to separation” in universal terms for an international audience.

Formal Declaration of Independence

The most important and dramatic statement comes near the end: “That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” It declares a complete break with Britain and its King and claims the powers of an independent country. (All here is from National Archives)

Declaration's Spirit, Principles, & Values (Abridged Text & Added Headings)

“The Declaration of Independence states the principles on which our government, and our identity as Americans, are based.” (National Archives) (Abridged text of the Declaration follows.)

Preamble - Rights of Individuals; Government's Powers are from the Consent of the Governed

“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”.

List of 27 Grievances (the proof of the right to rebellion) Against King George III – Then ...

“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”.

Colonists' Prior Attempts at Reconciliation

“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 Brittish 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.”

Ending Allegiance to British Crown - Formal Declaration of Independence

“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.”