The **Declaration of Independence**, adopted on **July 4, 1776**, is one of the most important documents in American history. It proclaimed the **Thirteen Colonies'** separation from Great Britain and outlined their principles of liberty and self-governance.

**Background:**

1. **Growing Tensions**:
   * British policies like the **Stamp Act (1765)** and the **Intolerable Acts (1774)** fueled resentment among colonists.
   * Calls for independence grew after pamphlets like **Thomas Paine’s "Common Sense"** argued for breaking away from British rule.
2. **Second Continental Congress**:
   * Convened in **May 1775** in Philadelphia, the Congress initially sought reconciliation but later moved toward declaring independence.
   * In **June 1776**, a committee was formed to draft a declaration.

**Drafting the Declaration:**

1. **Primary Author**:
   * **Thomas Jefferson** was tasked with writing the first draft, with contributions and edits from **John Adams**, **Benjamin Franklin**, **Roger Sherman**, and **Robert Livingston**.
2. **Content**:
   * **Preamble**: Explains the purpose of the document and asserts the right to independence.
   * **Philosophical Foundation**: Proclaims that "all men are created equal" with unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
   * **List of Grievances**: Details the colonists' complaints against **King George III**, including imposing taxes without consent and dissolving colonial legislatures.
   * **Conclusion**: Declares the colonies as "free and independent states" with full sovereignty.

**Adoption:**

* After debates and revisions, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration on **July 4, 1776**.
* **John Hancock**, as president of the Congress, famously signed it first, with a large signature.

**Key Principles:**

1. **Equality**: Asserts that all individuals have equal rights under natural law.
2. **Consent of the Governed**: Governments derive their power from the people's consent.
3. **Right to Revolution**: People have the right to overthrow oppressive governments.

**Impact:**

1. **Inspiring the Revolution**:
   * The Declaration galvanized support for independence both domestically and abroad.
   * It became a symbol of the colonies' resolve to break from British rule.
2. **Global Influence**:
   * Inspired movements for democracy and human rights worldwide, including the French Revolution and later independence movements in Latin America.
3. **Legacy**:
   * The Declaration remains a cornerstone of American identity, embodying the ideals of freedom and equality.
   * The **Fourth of July** is celebrated annually as **Independence Day** in the United States.