

*The Act of Abjuration: Edict of the States general of the United Netherlands by which they declare that the king of Spain has forfeited the sovereignty and government of the a-foresaid Netherlands, with a lengthy explanation of the reasons thereof, and in which they forbid the use of his name and seal in these same countries, July 26, 1581*

Introduction: The Act of Abjuration of 1581 is sometimes known as the Declaration of Independence of the Dutch Republic. This is a misnomer on two counts. First, the Act did not proclaim the sovereignty of a new state, since in September of 1580 William of Orange had offered the sovereignty of the Low Countries to the Duke of Anjou, the brother of the French king, in an attempt to secure aid from the French. Having offered sovereignty to the Duke of Anjou, it was now necessary to formerly renounce Phillip II. The States General of the Low Countries passed this Act of Abjuration on July 26 of 1581. The Act argued that the Spanish King had failed to respect the historic rights and privileges of the Low Countries and thus they sought a new sovereign. Secondly, the Act was not passed by the Dutch Republic, which had not formally been created yet, but by the Estates General of the Low Countries with the exception of those southern provinces (Artois, Hainaut and Walloon Flanders, most of the latter is in what is now France) who had formed the Union of Arras in 1579. Nonetheless, the Act is important because it was the most explicit statement of the doctrine of the right of a people to throw over a tyrant and establish its own form of government until the Declaration of Independence of 1776. The document below is the English part of the bilingual text of the Act of Abjuration (*het Plakkaat van Verlatinge* in "modernized" Dutch spelling, at [http://www.h4.dion.ne.jp/~room4me/docs/abj\\_dut.htm](http://www.h4.dion.ne.jp/~room4me/docs/abj_dut.htm)).

The States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries, to all whom it may concern, do by these Presents send greeting: As it is apparent to all that a prince is constituted by God to be ruler of a people, to defend them from oppression and violence as the shepherd his sheep; and whereas God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his commands, whether right or wrong, but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects (without which he could be no prince), to govern them according to equity, to love and support them as a father his children or a shepherd his flock, and even at the hazard of life to defend and preserve them. And when he does not behave thus, but, on the contrary, oppresses them, seeking opportunities to infringe their ancient customs and privileges, exacting from them slavish compliance, then he is no longer a prince, but a tyrant, and the subjects are to consider him in no other view. And particularly when this is done deliberately, unauthorized by the states, they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another prince for their defense. This is the only method left for subjects whose humble petitions and remonstrances could never soften their prince or dissuade him from his tyrannical proceedings; and this is what the law of nature

dictates for the defense of liberty, which we ought to transmit to posterity, even at the hazard of our lives. And this we have seen done frequently in several countries upon the like occasion, and more justifiable in our land, which has been always governed according to their ancient privileges, which are expressed in the oath taken by the prince at his admission to the government; for most of the Provinces receive their prince upon certain conditions, which he swears to maintain, which, if the prince violates, he is no longer sovereign. Now thus it was that the king of Spain after the demise of the emperor, his father, Charles the Fifth, of the glorious memory (of whom he received all these provinces), forgetting the services done by the subjects of these countries, both to his father and himself, by whose valor he got so glorious and memorable victories over his enemies that his name and power became famous and dreaded over all the world, forgetting also the advice of his said imperial majesty, made to him before to the contrary, did rather hearken to the counsel of those Spaniards about him, who had conceived a secret hatred to this land and to its liberty, because they could not enjoy posts of honor and high employments here under the states as in Naples, Sicily, Milan and the Indies, and other countries under the king's dominion. Thus allured by the riches of the said provinces, wherewith many of them were well acquainted, the said counselors, we say, or the principal of them, frequently remonstrated to the king that it was more for his Majesty's reputation and grandeur to subdue the Low Countries a second time, and to make himself absolute,(by which they mean to tyrannize at pleasure),than to govern according to the restrictions he had accepted, and at his admission sworn to observe. From that time forward the king of Spain, following these evil counselors, sought by all means possible to reduce this country (stripping them of their ancient privileges) to slavery, under the government of Spaniards having first, under the mask of religion, endeavored to settle new bishops in the largest and principal cities, endowing and incorporating them with the richest abbeys, assigning to each bishop nine canons to assist him as counselors, three whereof should superintend the inquisition. By this incorporation the said bishops (who might be strangers as well as natives) would have had the first place and vote in the assembly of the states, and always the prince's creatures at devotion; and by the addition of the said canons he would have introduced the Spanish inquisition, which has been always as dreadful and detested in these provinces as the worst of slavery, as is well known, in so much that his imperial majesty, having once before proposed it to these states, and upon whose remonstrances did desist, and entirely

## MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

“The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.”

— Alexander Hamilton, 1775



“The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitutions of Government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, ‘till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People is sacredly obligatory upon all.”

— George Washington, 1796



“The Declaration of Independence...[is the] declaratory charter of our rights, and of the rights of man.”

— Thomas Jefferson, 1819

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are the two most important, and enduring documents in our Nation’s history. It has been said that “the Declaration of Independence was the promise; the Constitution was the fulfillment.”

More than 200 years ago, our Founding Fathers set out to establish a government based on individual rights and the rule of law. The Declaration of Independence, which officially broke all political ties between the American colonies and Great Britain, set forth the ideas and principles behind a just and fair government, and the Constitution outlined how this government would function. Our founding documents have withstood the test of time, rising to the challenge each time they were called upon.

Make no mistake, we have been presented with a timeless framework for self-government, but in order to preserve this wonderful gift, we must hold these principles close to our hearts. I encourage you to read and understand these documents. I promise you will be nothing short of inspired.

Director

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

# THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Action of Second Continental Congress, July 4, 1776  
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 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; 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