



On July 2, 1776, after months of deliberation and while directing battle in the colonies and Canada, the Second Continental Congress voted to declare the “united States of America” separate and independent from Britain. On July 4, the Congress approved the final wording of the Declaration, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson. Copies were immediately printed and distributed throughout the colonies and the continental troops. On July 9, with the approval of the last colony, New York, the Declaration became the “unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” On August 2, 1776, the printed Declaration was signed by most of the congressional delegates, the final signature affixed in 1781 by the New Hampshire delegate.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

[grievances annotated]

IN 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.¹

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 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. — 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.²

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¹ Jefferson based much of the Declaration’s text on his preamble to the Virginia constitution and on Virginia’s Declaration of Rights (composed by George Mason), both written in June 1776. Scholars still debate the relative influence on Jefferson from other documents, including Locke’s 1689 treatises on government, yet it is clear that the Enlightenment concepts of “natural law” and the “natural rights of mankind” found an early forceful expression in the 1776 declaration of the “thirteen united States of America.”

² Twenty-seven grievances are given, many in vague or overstated language for the purpose of persuasion and dramatic intensity. All relate to Britain’s increase of imperial control after the French and Indian War (1754-1763), which ended the relative autonomy long valued by the colonies.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accomodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

1 Colonial laws had to be approved by the British monarch, and Parliament could ban colonial initiatives. For example, the king blocked several colonies' attempts to tax the slave trade, and Parliament banned colonies from printing their own paper money, which colonists felt was essential to their commercial vitality.

2 In several instances, the king instructed royal governors to block pending colonial legislation. At times, months or years would pass before the king addressed a colonial enactment, if ever.

3 The British officials feared large legislative bodies as parochial and democratic, so they sought to restrict their growth. This restriction left many new frontier communities poorly represented in their colonial assemblies.

4 In retribution for their resistance to British authority, the assemblies of Massachusetts, Virginia, and South Carolina were ordered for periods of time to convene at a site other than their normal meeting places where all their critical papers and records were kept.

5 By 1776, nearly all the colonial assemblies had been dissolved at some point, for weeks or months, due to their stands against British authority.

6 With their assemblies dissolved and unable to elect new representatives, colonists were in effect without local government.

7 King George III considered limiting emigration to the colonies of non-British Europeans, especially Germans, partly because they would not bring with them a traditional allegiance to the Crown. Americans, however, valued the increase of independent settlers (rather than of freed prisoners from British jails). In addition, the king in 1763 had virtually banned American settlement in the Ohio River Valley, a region long coveted by the expanding colonies (the ban was lifted in 1768).

8 From 1773 to 1776 North Carolina had no superior courts due to a stalemate between its assembly and the governor over the assembly's insistence on allowing "attachments" (similar to garnishment) to seize British debtors' property, a practice banned by Parliament.

9 In 1767 the king removed one essential power of the colonies—paying the salaries of royal officials. Without the "power of the purse," the assemblies could wield little influence over governors, judges, customs commissioners, and other British officials.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

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 them, 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:

10 Of the new offices created after 1763, the most unpopular were the British customs agents (tax collectors) who arrived in 1767 with expanded authority to conduct searches of ships and warehouses for goods smuggled into the colonies (a practice, long ignored by Britain, to avoid British import taxes). [*The 1789 Bill of Rights bans "unreasonable searches and seizures" (Fourth Amendment).*]

11 In 1768 the first British troops sent to the colonies for the sole purpose of enforcing British authority arrived in Boston. The escalating hostility led to the Boston Massacre of 1770 and other violent confrontations.

12 In 1774 the British appointed a general, Thomas Gage, to double as the civil governor of Massachusetts. This offended the Patriots, who wanted a strict separation of the military and civil authority. [*The U.S. Constitution assigns the role of commander-in-chief of the military forces to a civil official, the President.*]

13 After 1763, the king assented to laws of Parliament that many colonists considered illegitimate, coercive, and punitive ("pretended legislation"), one creating a new colonial Board of Trade (a "jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution") that enforced new trade laws and taxes.

14 In 1764 Parliament required the colonial assemblies to provide funds for food, drink, provisions, and housing (in unoccupied buildings) for British troops in America. [*The 1789 Bill of Rights places strict limits on the government's authority to house soldiers in private dwellings (Third Amendment).*]

15 In 1774 Parliament authorized that British soldiers accused of murder could be sent to Britain for trial instead of being tried in America with a jury of colonists.

16 In 1774, Parliament closed the port of Boston and in 1775, with the outbreak of war, ordered the total blockade of American shipping.



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