

## Chapter 13

# Declaring Independence

**W**e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

With these now famous words, Thomas Jefferson declared the colonies to be free and independent. Written fifteen months after the Battle of Lexington, the Declaration of Independence stated the causes for America's separation from England and expressed the philosophy of government on which this country was founded. The Declaration marked an important event in America's history and expressed ideals that were to influence the development of the United States as we know it today. This chapter will ask you to examine two aspects of this famous document.

### Steps to American Independence

The embattled farmers who fought the British troops in Lexington and Concord did not plan to break away from England. Instead, they sought to protest the rights that they, as Englishmen, felt were legally theirs. Fifteen months after the initial battle, the colonists decided they could no longer expect to obtain their rights within the British Empire, and they declared their independence from it. Below are some of the key events that led to this decision.

**April, 1775** - Campfires blaze around the city of Boston. Farmers from all over New England gather in a hastily formed army around the Massachusetts capital. The British army is now imprisoned within.

**June, 1775** - General Gage ferries his soldiers from Boston to Charleston and orders a frontal attack on fortified positions at Breed's Hill. Commanded to hold their fire until "you see the whites of [the enemy's] eyes," the colonists inflicted 1,000 casualties on the British, and left the field of battle only after they ran out of ammunition. The engagement was mistakenly called The Battle of Bunker Hill.

**May and June, 1775** - The Second Continental Congress convenes and appoints a Virginian, George Washington, to command the New England army. Washington arrives in Cambridge shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill. His presence transfers the New England army into the American army.

**June, 1775** - Congress, still divided on the question of war or peace, sends two petitions to England. In one it states America's right to resist the British. In the second, it appeals to the King to stop Parliament from enslaving the colonies. Parliament refuses to acknowledge the second petition and the King will not even read it.

**January, 1776** - An unknown British Immigrant, Thomas Paine, publishes a pamphlet entitled, *Common Sense*. Paine calls on "ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth." He urges his fellow citizens to separate themselves from the evils of Europe to build a new society, "an asylum for mankind." 100,000 copies of this document are printed and for thousands of Americans a yearning for freedom is awakened.

**1775-76** - The British land troops along the defenseless town of Falmouth, Maine and burn it to the ground. At the same time, Parliament passes the "Restraining Act" which cuts off all American trade

outside of the British Empire, and King George hires thousands of German soldiers (known as Hessians) to put down the rebellion.

**March, 1776** - Shortly after the Battle of Lexington, Ethan Allen led his famous Green Mountain boys in a successful attack on Fort Ticonderoga, in upstate New York. The following winter, cannon from the fort are dragged some 300 miles through the snow to Boston. In March, George Washington mounts his artillery in strategic positions overlooking the old city. Faced by this unexpected move, the British commander realizes that he can no longer hold Boston. He leaves Boston on March 17th, a day still celebrated in Massachusetts as Evacuation Day.

**June, 1776** - Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, John Adams, and others are asked to write an explanation of the reasons to declare independence. Although a slave owner, Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence contains a denunciation of the slave trade. This item is struck out by Southern delegates who resent it as a criticism of their morals and way of life. Since unanimous approval is required to proceed with the business of declaring independence, Jefferson and others opposed to the slave trade give in. The exclusion of a denunciation of the slave trade and the status of African-Americans at the time of the Revolution, are important reasons for an on-going debate over the sincerity of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.



**Signing the Declaration of Independence**

## **The Ideals Stated in the Declaration**

On July 4, 1776, Congress unanimously approves the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration contains a statement of principles following the ideas of the natural rights philosophy originally expressed by the British philosopher, John Locke. It clearly sets forth the purpose of government: to protect people's inalienable rights, and proclaims the revolutionary idea that mankind has the right to alter or abolish governments that fail to meet their obligations:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable 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 a 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.*

## The Declaration Denounces George III

The Declaration also contained a denunciation of King George III, the "tyrant" responsible for violating the rights that governments are established to protect. Included in the Declaration were the following accusations:

- *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 invasion of the rights of people.*
- *He has kept among us, in time 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;*
- *For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury.*
- *For transporting us beyond the seas to be tried for pretended offenses.*
- *For taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering, fundamentally, the powers of our governments.*
- *For suspending our own legislatures and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.*
- *He had abdicated government here by declaring us out of his protection, and waging war against us.*
- *He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt 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 paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy of the head of a civilized nation.*
- *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.*

## Independence is Declared

The Declaration of Independence contains a conclusion which follows logically from the idea that governments are established to protect the same rights which King George had systematically denied Americans.

*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 the 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, for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Devine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.*

### Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

- |   |                                      |                                     |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. Thomas Jefferson                       | d. inalienable rights                | people can                          |
| b. Declaration on slave trade             | e. purpose of government             | e. 4 grievances against King George |
| c. 3 parts of Declaration of Independence | f. when government fails to do above | f. therefore we declare that        |
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### Understanding the Meaning of a Document

A great document, such as the Declaration of Independence, should be understood on a variety of different levels.

2. Summarize the events that led up to the writing of the Declaration.

3. Memorize the statement of ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence, beginning with "We hold these truths" and ending with "to alter or abolish it."

4. Explain the logic contained in the Declaration of Independence beginning with a statement about the purpose of government.

5. Decide which of the following statements comes closest to expressing your beliefs about the Declaration of Independence:

- The Declaration states the causes of the American Revolution and the ideals for which it was fought.
- The Declaration is a statement written by self-serving politicians and gives a false picture of the Revolution's causes.
- The Declaration presents a set of ideals that inspired the Revolution and should still inspire Americans today.
- The Declaration states hopelessly unworkable ideals.