

Why The Declaration Is Important

If the Constitution contains the letter of American law, the Declaration of Independence proclaims its spirit. Lincoln called the Declaration's assertion of liberty for all an "apple of gold" that was framed by the Constitution's "picture of silver." Forged in the crucible of revolution, the Declaration lays forth the principles of liberty that were at the very heart of the American Founding and continue to uplift and empower the people of this nation nearly two-and-a-half centuries since.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration in June of 1776, American colonists had already braved a year of armed conflict with Great Britain, which possessed the most powerful military the world had ever known. They fought for the right of self-governance, direct representation in Parliament, and against unjust taxation by the British crown.

Despite bloody battles at Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill, many Americans hoped for an eventual reconciliation with their mother country, even as King George III rejected offers of peace from the Second Continental Congress.

In this time of danger and uncertainty, 56 men, chosen representatives of the American colonies, pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to declare independence from Great Britain and create a new nation. This was no easy act of defiance—each knew that he was committing treason against the crown, and so doing, signing his own death warrant. Benjamin Franklin expressed the need for solidarity and the fear of punishment when he said, "We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

The document lists a number of offenses by the British government against Americans, including suspending democratic self-governance, keeping standing armies to patrol the colonies, establishing a bureaucracy designed to harass the people, imposing taxes without consent or representation, hiring foreign mercenaries against its own citizens, and many more.

But the boldest claim of the Declaration lay not in its enumeration of injustices and legal complaints, however justified. In its poetry, the Declaration was most powerful:

"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."

We are all made of the same materials—the same humble flesh, and the same humble souls. It is not from government or man that we receive our innate dignity, but from the fact of our common origin from God. We were created equal. We are equal.

American history is a grand story of the fight to recognize these eternal principles in our people, our culture, and our laws. Our country has not always lived up to this grand promise. But the American people have always persevered. With inspiration from the Declaration of Independence, we continue the fight for freedom and equality.

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