

A meditation on the Declaration

Nations are created by civil strife, military rebellion, acts of heroism, acts of treachery. The origin of the United States included them all. This was unique, not only in its impact on the course of world history and the growth of democracy, but also because it all started in one document: the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration was drafted by Thomas Jefferson between June 11 and June 28, 1776. Jefferson wrote of the convictions in the minds and hearts of the American people. The political philosophy of the Declaration was not new. The ideals of individual liberty had already been expressed by John Locke and others. Jefferson summarized this philosophy in "self-evident truths" and listed the grievances against the king in order to justify breaking the ties between the Colonies and England.

The Declaration was the result of many prods by the king against the citizens in the Colonies. For example, in August 1775, a royal proclamation declared that the king's American subjects were "engaged in open and avowed rebellion." Later that year, Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, which made all American vessels and cargoes forfeit to the crown. In May 1776, the Congress learned that the king had negotiated treaties with German states to hire mercenaries to fight in America. These authoritarian acts convinced many colonists that England was treating the Colonies as a foreign entity.

One by one, the Continental Congress continued to cut the Colonies' ties to England. The Second Continental Congress was essentially the government of the United States from 1775 to 1788 and gradually took on the responsibilities of a national government. When it met in May 1775, King George III had not yet replied to the petition for redress of grievances sent by the First Continental Congress. In June 1775, Congress established the Continental Army as well as a continental currency. By the end of July of that year, it created a post office for the "United Colonies."

In March 1776, Congress adopted the Privateering Resolution, which allowed the colonists to arm ships to attack the enemies of the "United Colonies." In April 1776, American ports were opened to commerce with other nations, an action that severed the economic ties fostered by the Navigation Acts. A "Resolution for the Formation of Local Governments" was passed on May 10, 1776.

During the spring of 1776, the Colonies took further steps toward independence from England. On May 15, a resolution was adopted at the Virginia Convention in Williamsburg that instructed the Virginia delegates in Congress to propose to "declare the United Colonies free and independent States, absolved from all allegiance to, or dependence on, the Crown or Parliament of Great Britain."

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The idea of Colonial independence

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gained momentum with the circulation of Thomas Paine's popular pamphlet, "Common Sense," which was published in January 1776 and sold thousands of copies. On May 27, Congress received the Virginia resolution and the movement toward independence quickened. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia presented to Congress a motion.

Resolved, 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 that a political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.

The Lee resolution was seconded by Massachusetts delegate John Adams. Further debate was postponed until the following day. The delegates to the Continental Congress were divided on the issues of independence and the establishment of confederated colonies and some expressed their reluctance to declare independence. By June 11, Congress decided to recess for three weeks. But it was apparent to the delegates that Lee's resolution would ultimately pass, so before adjourning, Congress appointed a committee to prepare a declaration. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York and Roger Sherman of Connecticut were assigned the task.

The committee selected Thomas Jefferson to draft the document. Jefferson, at 33 years old, had experience in political service and writing. In 1774, while a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, Jefferson wrote