

# **The Declaration of Independence (1776)**

**Thomas Jefferson**

## **Historical Background**

By the summer of 1776 the American colonies had already been engaged in a military conflict with the British Crown and Parliament for a year. In spite of the reigning state of war, no formal declaration of independence had been made by the colonies, as many hoped for reconciliation and still expressed loyalty to the Crown (King George III). In fact, in the summer of 1775, the Second Continental Congress had attempted to call on the King to intercede in the conflict on their behalf. King George III was not persuaded by the so called “Olive Branch Petition” sent by the Congress and considered the colonies to be in active rebellion against the crown. In this context the Congress met in the summer of 1776 with little hope of reconciliation and a strong sentiment in favor of formally declaring the colonies independent.

## **Historical Significance**

The Declaration of Independence, along with the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, are considered the “founding documents” of our nation, even though the Declaration is not a formal part of our system of government. In the first place, the Declaration represented an attempt by the American colonials to justify their actions to the rest of “mankind” and to history, with profound self-awareness of this fact. Further, the Declaration presented a practical articulation of the “right to revolution” theory first proffered by John Locke in the seventeenth century. Finally, the most famous sentence in American political life beginning, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...,” provides an eloquent foundation to the political philosophy of the United States. Later, President Abraham Lincoln would urge his fellow citizens to view the Declaration as an aspirational creed that could be better fulfilled through rededication to the principles of equality that should hold for all men, regardless of race.

## **Key Concepts and Learning Objectives**

Concepts: inalienable rights; equal rights; right of revolution; causes of the Revolutionary War; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; purpose of government

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- describe the reasons for the establishment of governments, according to Thomas Jefferson and other signatories of the Declaration;
- describe the causes of the Revolutionary War, as listed in the Declaration;
- explain why the American colonists felt they were entitled to overthrow their governing system and establish a new one;

- evaluate whether the colonists were justified in utilizing their theory of “right of revolution” given the grievances they list in the Declaration;
- evaluate the importance of the appeals to a Creator, Supreme Judge, or Divine Providence in the Declaration.

## Questions to Explore

What are the strengths and weaknesses of articulating a “right of revolution” as a part of the founding documents of a country?

What is the proper relationship between religious language and public political address? If this relationship has changed over time, why has it done so?

What is the relationship between aspirational (ideal) political principles and the fact that reality may fall short of those aspirations? As a specific example, the drafter of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, was a prominent patriot and a wealthy slaveholder: how does this affect the way that principles of equality and freedom were perceived early in American history and even today?

Are the most important moral truths “self-evident” assertions or do they need to be proven by evidence and arguments? Why?

What does it mean for a truth to be “self-evident?”

Among its listing of self-evident truths the Declaration holds that “all men are created equal.” What does this statement mean about equality? In what sense should all humans be considered equal?

Even though the colonies were often fiercely independent of each other, the Declaration is drafted, declared and signed on behalf of “one people.” What characteristics, categories or attributes define or constitute a people?