

Module 2: The Constitution

Topic 2 Content: The Declaration of Independence

Introduction



Demi Tracy: Welcome to WUSG News. I'm Demi Tracy. The Declaration of Independence is one of the most important documents in American history. Its influence on American government is undeniable, despite the fact that it is technically not a legal document. In this episode, Glover Mint will discuss who wrote the Declaration of Independence, why it was written, and the ideas that inspired it.

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The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence

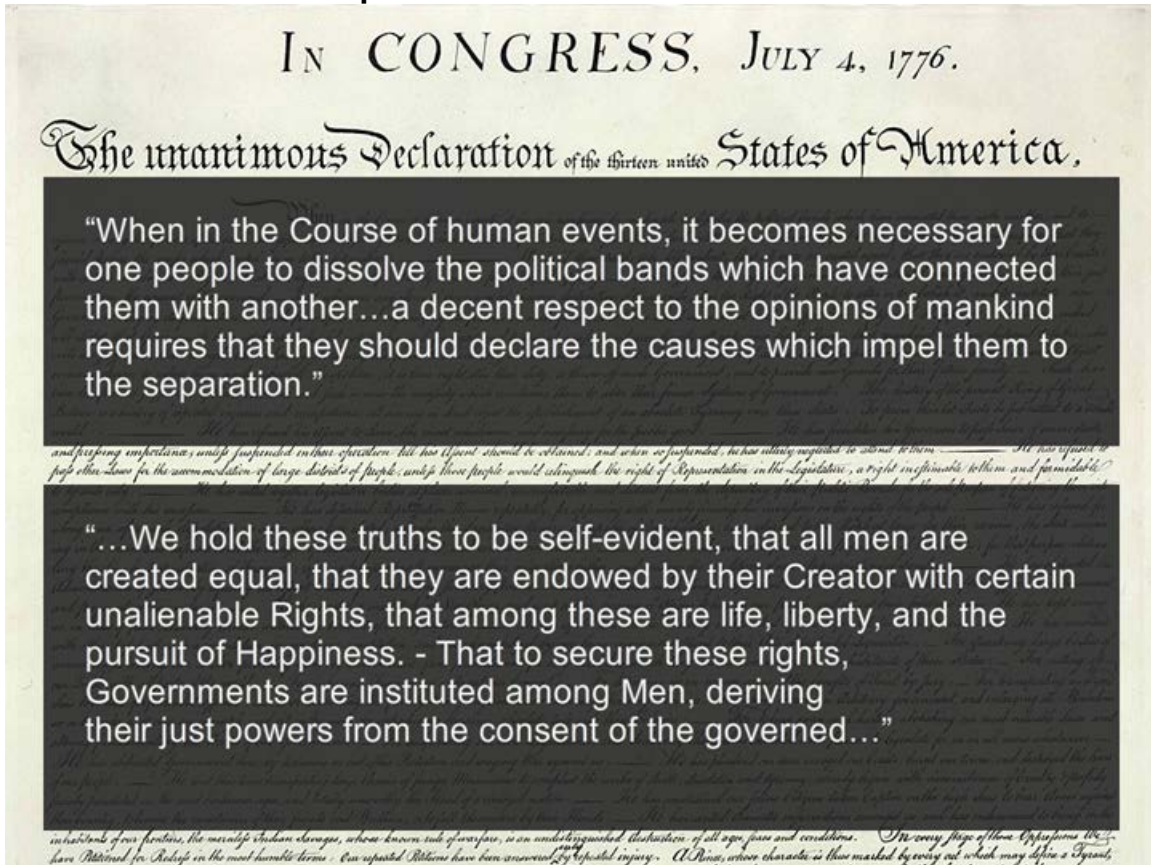


Glover Mint: The Second Continental Congress appointed a committee of delegates to write an official declaration of independence. Congress appointed John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and Virginian Thomas Jefferson to the committee. The committee decided that Jefferson should write the official draft.

This declaration was not a legal document, as no laws were outlined in it. It did not initiate the Revolutionary War, because the colonies were already in open conflict with England. The Declaration of Independence served as an official public relations announcement. It was an attempt to justify the need for American independence and possibly win support from other nations in the war with England.

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The Declaration of Independence II



Glover Mint: Jefferson began the declaration by explaining why it needed to be written.

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another... a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

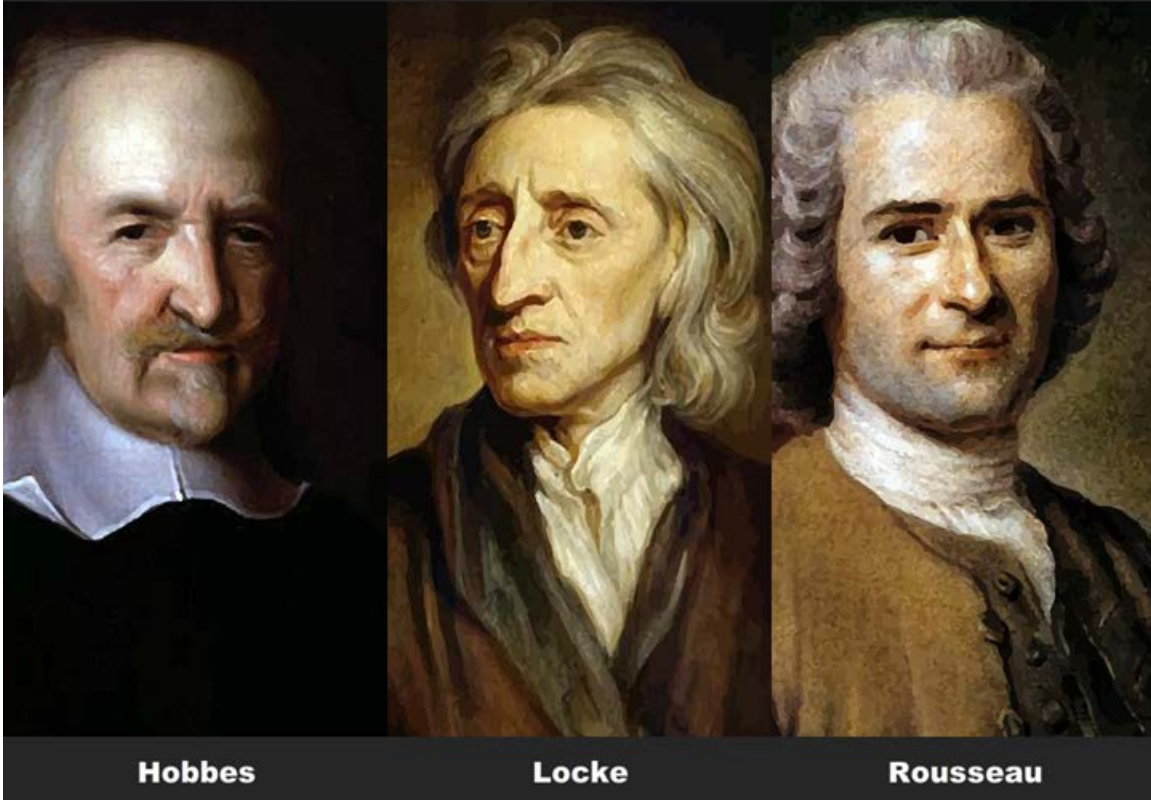
He continued...

“...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...”

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Philosophers Who Influenced the Declaration of Independence

Please Select a Philosopher from Below



Glover Mint: Within the Declaration of Independence, there are echoes of the ideas and philosophies of the great thinkers John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

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Thomas Hobbes


Thomas Hobbes

- Believed mankind must surrender certain freedoms to live in a state of peace
- Thought men would live in a constant state of war if they did not give up their absolute freedom and consent to be governed
- Viewed the social contract as citizens surrendering their total freedom for the promise of peace and security

“...For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing anything he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war...”

Leviathan, 1651



Next 

Glover Mint: Thomas Hobbes held the belief that for mankind to live in a state of peace, certain freedoms must be surrendered to a civil power. Hobbes argued that if men did not give up their absolute freedom and consent to be governed, they would live in a state of war, fighting one another for resources. These ideas were stated in his book *Leviathan*, published in 1651.

“...For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing anything he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war...”

Essentially, Hobbes viewed the social contract of government as citizens consenting to surrender their rights to total freedom, in exchange for the promise of peace and security by those who govern.

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John Locke

John Locke

- Believed government was the only way to protect the natural rights of man
- Thought governments could only attain power when it is willfully surrendered by citizens
- Effective governments rule through the consent of the governed

“...MEN being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be... subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent...”

The Second Treatise of Government, 1689



Glover Mint: John Locke believed that government was the only way to protect the natural rights of man. Locke documented these ideas in his book, *The Second Treatise of Government*.

“Man...hath by nature a power, not only to preserve his property, that is his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men; but to judge...and punish the breaches of that law in others...as the offence deserves...in his opinion...”

Locke is referring to the freedom that citizens must give up, in order to establish a civil society. This power must be turned over to government, but the government can only attain this power when it is willfully surrendered by citizens. In order for government to be effective, citizens must consent to be governed.

“...MEN being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be...subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent...”

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John Locke II

John Locke

- Citizens surrender power to government through a social contract
- Social contract gives up the freedoms granted by the laws of nature
- Freedoms exchanged for a government with the power to provide a peaceful society

“...Whosoever therefore out of a state of nature unite into a community, must be understood to give up all the power, necessary to the ends for which they unite into society...”

The Second Treatise of Government, 1689



Glover Mint: The core of John Locke's philosophy on government amounts to this: citizens surrender their powers to government and enter into a social contract, giving up their power and freedoms from the law of nature in exchange for a government empowered to provide a peaceful society. These sentiments are expressed throughout the Declaration of Independence, as well as the following passages from *The Second Treatise of Government*.

“...Whosoever therefore out of a state of nature unite into a community, must be understood to give up all the power, necessary to the ends for which they unite into society...”

“...And thus that, which begins and actually constitutes any political society, is nothing but the consent of any number of freemen capable of a majority to unite and incorporate into such a society. And this...only...could give beginning to any lawful government in the world.”

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- Believed all men were created equal
- Held similar beliefs to those in the Declaration of Independence

“...You could call the family the *prime model* of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all of them - ruler, people, father, children - because they were born free and equal don't give up their liberty without getting something in return...”

The Social Contract, 1762



Glover Mint: Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that all men were created equal, a belief similar to the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In his book, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau expressed this idea in the following passages:

“...You could call the family the *prime model* of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all of them – ruler, people, father, children – because they were born free and equal don't give up their liberty without getting something in return...”

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Ending of Episode



Demi Tracy: I can see how the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau influenced Jefferson while he penned the Declaration of Independence. Hobbes' and Locke's beliefs that governments received their powers from the consent of the governed, and Rousseau's belief that all men are created equal, are echoed throughout the document. That's all for today's episode. See you next time!