

Module 2: The American Revolution - 1750s to the 1780s

Topic 2 Content: The Declaration of Independence Notes

Introduction



A committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson was appointed the task of writing a declaration of independence from British control. Virginia lawyer Thomas Jefferson is given credit for the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's writing was heavily influenced by the concepts of philosophers John Locke and Thomas Paine. In this interactivity, analyze the Declaration of Independence and learn how the ideas of John Locke and Thomas Paine influenced one of the most important documents in the United States History. Click **Start** to begin.

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Declaration of Independence

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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, --

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 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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the

As you read the Declaration of Independence, click the highlighted text to learn more about the meaning and influences of each passage.

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First Passage

Text

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

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Analysis

The first passage of the Declaration of Independence states that as a matter of natural law, the colonists have a right to assert their political independence. It also explains that the Declaration of Independence will detail the reasons for which the colonies are affirming their independence from Great Britain.

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Second Passage

Text

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.

Analysis

This section presents the principles of the Declaration of Independence. It states that all men are equal and have inherent rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. John Locke's ideas on individuals' natural rights to live freely and own property highly influenced this section.

While the Declaration states that "all men are created equal," at the time, this group was understood to include white, male landowners. The privilege of democracy had not yet been extended to include African-Americans, women, or other minorities.

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Third Passage

Text

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Analysis

All of government's power originates with the people. The people yield their power to government, and agree to follow laws that are designed to protect their natural rights. This concept reflects the ideas of John Locke, an advocate of the social contract theory. This theory explains that citizens must enter into an agreement with government, giving up certain freedoms in exchange for protection of their basic rights.

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Fourth Passage

Text

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 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.

Analysis

This passage echoes John Locke's views on the right of the people to change the government. If the government violates the social contract and threatens the natural rights of its citizens, the people have the right to establish a new government.

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Fifth Passage

Text

To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

Analysis

After acknowledging that governments should not be overthrown for minor offenses, the Declaration goes on to explain that the suffering of the colonists was not minor at all. The King of England had repeatedly abused the people, and ruled them with absolute tyranny.

To eliminate any doubt about the history of abuses committed by the King, the Declaration presented a list of grievances that demonstrated how the King violated the colonists' rights. Many of the twenty-seven grievances listed, had also been included in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.

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Sixth Passage

Text

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

Analysis

Many colonists still had relationships with the people of England. In addition to submitting humble petitions for change, these same colonists appealed in vain to the government and leaders. Some English even tried to convince Parliament to persuade the King to relax his objectionable policies. This section conveys their disappointment that these attempts had been unsuccessful.

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Seventh Passage

Text

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 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 that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Analysis

In the final section, the representatives, on behalf of the people of the colonies, declare that the colonies are free and independent from England. Thus, the free colonies have the same powers as any other independent state. Finally, the people pledge their lives, wealth, and honor to uphold their declaration of freedom.

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