

Excerpt, Declaration of Independence (1st two paragraphs)

Historical Background

The Declaration's opening words reflect powerful ideas about government, freedom, and individual rights. Many of these ideas were inspired by the English philosopher John Locke, who argued that all people are born with natural rights—life, liberty, and property—and that the main purpose of government is to protect those rights. He also believed that governments can only rule with the consent or agreement of the governed. Thus, if a government becomes abusive or fails to protect people's rights, the people have the right to overthrow it and establish a new one. These radical ideas challenged the competing belief in the divine right of kings, placing political power in the hands of the people.

Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, drew heavily on Locke's idea when crafting the founding document of the United States. He adapted Locke's "life, liberty, and property," turning it into "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The American founders understood the pursuit of happiness as a quest for *being* good, not *feeling* good—the pursuit of lifelong virtue, not short-term pleasure.

When Jefferson wrote that "all men are created equal," he was rejecting the idea that monarchs or nobles with titles had a natural right to rule. By declaring that governments exist to protect unalienable rights and derive their power from the people, Jefferson expressed a developing American political philosophy—one that justified independence from Britain and would later become the foundation for constitutional government in the United States. In the generations that followed, many others would draw on these words to push for the expansion of rights for more Americans and their fuller inclusion in the political process.

Consider these questions as you read the first two paragraphs of the Declaration:

1. How do the Declaration's big ideas—equality, unalienable rights, consent of the governed, and the right to revolt—reflect both the immediate needs of the American colonies in 1776 and the broader foundational principles on which the United States is based?
2. How has the Declaration of Independence served as a foundational text and a powerful tool for various groups throughout American history to assert their natural rights and demand an expansion of their political participation?
3. In what ways has the nation lived up to—or fallen short of—the ideals of the Declaration?

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 necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government...