



We Hold These Truths: Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and Identity

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

During the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists asserted that they had certain rights as Englishmen and as free human beings. In 1775, they went to war to defend those rights and liberties against what they considered to be British tyranny. In 1776, more and more important American statesmen, ordinary citizens, and soldiers argued for independence from Great Britain. Several factors propelled the Americans toward independence.

- American and British troops had fought the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, and a massive British fleet was preparing to invade New York.
- In January 1776, Thomas Paine electrified the colonists with his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, in which he justified independence.
- On May 15, 1776, expressing the idea of popular sovereignty—the belief that authority resides in the people—Congress had called on the individual colonies to “adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents.” This call to the colonies had a preamble written by John Adams, which declared, “It is necessary that the exercise of every kind of authority under the said Crown should be totally suppressed, and all the powers of government exerted under the authority of the people.”

On June 7, 1776, Virginian Richard Henry Lee rose in Congress and proposed a resolution that read, “That these United States 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.” The resolution sparked a vigorous debate, and Congress appointed a committee to draft a declaration of independence that included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was chosen to write the document because he was known to be an excellent writer, and firmly committed to the cause of liberty and self-government.

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In mid-June 1776, 33-year-old Virginian Thomas Jefferson was given a monumental task to complete. Leading American statesmen gathered in Congress in Philadelphia had created a committee of five individuals, made up of Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and John Adams. Their job was to draft a declaration of independence. Adams insisted that Jefferson write the document, later stating, “I had a great opinion of the elegance of his pen.”

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Jefferson, known for the beauty and precision of his writing, had studied at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia under the tutelage of law professor, George Wythe. Wythe assigned studies that encompassed a rich knowledge of the law and the greatest classics in the history of liberty and self-government. Jefferson developed a rigorous routine of reading in science, ethics, and religion from dawn until 8:00 a.m., reading law for the rest of the mornings until noon, studying politics and history for the rest of the afternoon, then turning to literature in the evenings until bedtime. His readings gave him a wonderful imagination and love of beauty, an appreciation for the principles of liberty, and an incisive mind that searched for first principles and ordered, logical arguments.

In 1769, Jefferson entered the Virginia House of Burgesses as a representative. He spoke little but listened carefully to the arguments for liberty and self-government. In 1774, he published the pamphlet *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which established his fame as a writer. In it, Jefferson wrote, "That these are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights, as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate." Jefferson concluded the pamphlet by writing eloquently about liberty and self-government, stating, "Our properties within our own territories shall [not] be taxed or regulated by any power on earth but our own. The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them."

Jefferson's reputation as a writer was enhanced when he traveled to Philadelphia to serve in the Continental Congress in late June 1775. John Adams was just one of many Founders who praised Jefferson's writing ability. He said that Jefferson was known for the "peculiar felicity of expression." Jefferson was chosen to pen the *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms*, which would be sent to King George III. In it, Jefferson wrote, "The arms we have been compelled by our enemies to assume, we will, in defiance of every hazard, with unabating firmness and perseverance, employ for the preservation of our liberties; being with one mind resolved to die freemen rather than to live as slaves."

Almost a year later, when the Congress considered a resolution for independence and assigned a five-man committee to draft a declaration of independence, Jefferson was selected to lead the panel. In mid-June 1776, he was chosen to draft the document.

Jefferson attended the Continental Congress during the day and wrote during the early mornings and in the evenings after dinner. He utilized a copy of fellow Virginian George Mason's recently-adopted *Virginia Declaration of Rights* for ideas, as well as his *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*. Additionally, Jefferson was well-acquainted with the works of classical republican thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero, as well as modern Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke.

When Jefferson was satisfied with his work, he showed the document to Adams and Franklin, who made minor edits. On July 1, as the temperatures in Philadelphia began to rise, the Declaration of Independence was presented to Congress and fiercely debated. On July 2, 1776, Congress adopted Richard Henry Lee's resolution for independence. Much to Jefferson's

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chagrin, Congress revised the original declaration that he had written with the help of Adams and Franklin.

As his identity was so closely tied to his writing and the principles of liberty, Jefferson was deeply wounded by the editing of the Declaration. He sat there sullenly, barely listening as his fellow delegates cut about a quarter of his text. Benjamin Franklin leaned over to assuage the young man's hurt feelings with a story. A hatter once asked his friends for their opinion on a sign he created for his shop that read, "John Thompson, Hatter, Makes and Sells Hats for Ready Money." The friends kept whittling down unnecessary words until the sign contained only his name and the drawing of a hat. Jefferson might not have liked the changes Congress made, but out of that fine-tuning a foundation of liberty emerged.

Jefferson's Declaration of Independence helped create a republic in which rights came from "nature and nature's God," not government. It proclaimed universal principles of liberty and equality, declaring, "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."

The document was based upon a compact theory of government in which the sovereign people voluntarily agreed to form a republic rooted in their consent. The people had the right to overthrow a government that failed in its essential duty to protect natural rights. Jefferson outlined this principle in the Declaration, writing, "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 affect their safety and happiness."

With Congress' adoption of the Declaration, delegates mutually pledged to each other their "lives . . . fortunes . . . and sacred honor." Jefferson would go on to serve in many important offices—governor of Virginia, minister to France, secretary of state, vice-president, and president—and achieve significant accomplishments throughout his life. However, no achievement could rival the importance of the Declaration of Independence. When he composed his epitaph, he selected writing the Declaration as one of his three greatest accomplishments due to its contribution towards achieving liberty for the United States. He identified strongly with the principles of liberty and sought to promote freedom not only for Americans but also for the entire world.