

# THEME ONE PRIMARY SOURCE

## EXCERPTED FROM PREAMBLE TO THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, 1776

### Questions to Consider

1. Which lines in the preamble explain why Jefferson believed that the colonies were compelled to declare independence?
2. Is this a radical document, advocating the destruction of authority; or a moderate one, calling for the restoration of order?

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. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

Thomas Jefferson, PREAMBLE TO THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (1776).  
 Courtesy <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch1s5.html>.

<b>Creator:</b>	Thomas Jefferson
<b>Context:</b>	Jefferson had been asked by the Continental Congress to head a committee charged with writing a declaration of independence.
<b>Audience:</b>	The nation and the world
<b>Purpose:</b>	To state clearly and persuasively the American case for revolution and independence

### Historical Significance:

One of the issues facing the writers of the Declaration of Independence was the question of slavery—the economic and social complexities were vast. Thomas Jefferson—himself a slaveholder—penned language asserting that the king had forced slavery on the colonists; Congress later removed that section. Slavery was a volatile issue for the patriots, so many leaders felt it best to ignore rather than criticize it.

But there was plenty in Jefferson's declaration that all patriots could agree on, including a meticulous accounting of King George's abuses of the colonies and a proclamation that they were now "free and independent states."

It is the first section of Jefferson's seminal work that we best remember. Here, in the preamble, Jefferson laid out the philosophical justification for revolution ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created "equal . . ." ) in words that would inspire slaves, women, and victims of colonization around the world for many years to come.

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## Conclusion

The American Revolution was a bold experiment in the history of Western civilization. Never before had such a large group so directly asserted their moral right to pursue political independence. Yet this was just the first a long series of incremental steps, in which the outcome was not at first anticipated. Once unleashed, however, the intoxicating ideas of liberty and freedom would prove difficult to restrict.

## Questions to Consider

1. The Declaration of Independence appeared more than a decade after major clashes and disagreements between Great Britain the thirteen colonies. Why did the Revolution take so long to begin?
2. What role did ideology play in the coming of the Revolution? To what extent did the ideology of inalienable rights simply mask economic and political self-interest?