**The Declaration of Independence: Background**

Every July 4, Americans celebrate the birthday of the United States. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. With this they cut the last link between the 13 original colonies and the government of Great Britain. The president of the Congress, John Hancock, signed the Declaration that day, in large and graceful handwriting. Fifty-five other delegates added their signatures one month later.

Soon the Declaration was printed in newspapers. George Washington, the commander of the American army, had it read aloud to his soldiers. He hoped it would inspire them to fight the British. The British army was still trying to keep the colonies within the British Empire. Americans had to fight for seven more years before they finally won their independence, in 1783.

Later, July 4 became a national holiday. People would read the Declaration aloud at large public meetings. Their favorite sentence was the one that said "all men are created equal."

Those words were put in the Declaration by its author, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a Virginia lawyer and planter who owned many slaves. When he wrote about equality in the Declaration, he meant that the American people had the same rights to liberty and self-government as people in Britain. He did not mean to say that all Americans should be equal to each other. But Jefferson's choice of words has led many Americans to think in just those terms ever since.

**Movement toward Independence**

When the Continental Congress approved the Declaration in 1776, it ended a debate that had begun over a decade earlier. Britain and the colonies had argued ever since the end of the French and Indian War (1754–63). Did Britain need to keep soldiers in the colonies? Did the colonists need to help pay for the troops? Most importantly, could the British Parliament tax the colonists even though they had no representatives there? Parliament repeatedly tried to impose taxes on the colonies. The colonists repeatedly protested and refused to pay.

In December 1773, to protest a tax on tea, some colonists destroyed a shipment of tea in the Boston Tea Party. Parliament sought to punish them by passing the Intolerable Acts in 1774. One of the acts closed the port of Boston to all ships. That brought matters to a crisis.

In September 1774, representatives from 12 of the 13 colonies (all except Georgia) assembled in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. They decided that the colonies had to obey the laws of Parliament that regulated the trade of the empire, but no others. Congress also agreed that the colonies had a link to the king; the king had given them their charters of government. But the colonies had their own legislatures. Congress wanted George III to agree that the legislatures of the colonies were equal in authority to the Parliament of Great Britain. The colonies, in other words, would be "independent" of Parliament but still "dependent" on the king.

George III rejected that idea. In his view, Parliament was the supreme legislature for his entire empire. The Americans had to obey it, whether or not they had representatives there. The king also believed that the colonists had to be made to pay for defying the British government. When fighting broke out between British soldiers and the Massachusetts militia in April 1775, the king favored sending more troops to America. In August 1775, the king told Parliament that he believed the Americans already wanted independence.

Most Americans were not seeking independence at that time. But once it became clear that the king favored using his army against them, Americans believed they were free to declare their complete independence. They would be free of the king as well as Parliament. By the spring of 1776, many Americans agreed that the time for a declaration of independence was near.

**The Declaration**

By early June 1776 the Second Continental Congress was ready to take the final steps toward independence. It appointed three committees. One would propose articles of union for the 13 colonies. A second would prepare a plan for making treaties with foreign governments. The third would write a declaration of independence. This third committee had five members. The best known at the time were Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and John Adams of Massachusetts. Adams had been the leading supporter of independence in Congress. The other members were Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Robert Livingston of New York, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. The other members of the committee knew Jefferson was an outstanding writer; they asked him to draft the declaration. The committee reviewed his work before it was presented to Congress.

The Declaration is divided into three parts of unequal length. An introduction of two paragraphs states the general ideals of government that justify the colonists' decision to become an independent nation. The second and longest section charges King George III with many violations of American rights. The final three paragraphs explain that the colonists have tried to solve their dispute with Britain peacefully. But because Britain has ignored all their efforts, the united colonies can now ask other nations to recognize that Americans have the same rights of self-government as any other people. Each of these points added an important element to the case for independence.

**Ideals of Government**

The most famous lines appear in the opening sentences. Jefferson stated three propositions in rapid order, saying "We hold these truths to be self-evident." First, "all men are created equal." Second, they possess "certain unalienable rights"—rights they can never surrender—to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Third, governments are formed for the purpose of securing these rights. Therefore, anytime a government acts without the consent of the governed (as Parliament had tried to do by passing laws affecting the American colonists), the people have a right to disobey that government and establish a new one.

**Charges against the King**

But the Declaration blamed the king, not Parliament, for the current crisis. The Declaration listed 27 specific charges against "the present king of Great Britain" and the kings who had ruled before him. George III was accused of trying to establish "an absolute tyranny" over the colonies. Some of the charges cited problems that had bothered Americans long before 1765. For example, the British monarch had often vetoed laws that the colonists had adopted for their own benefit. Other charges were much more recent. The charges that mattered most were these: The king had approved laws punishing the colonists for trying to protect their just rights, and then he made war against them. A king who acted this way could no longer expect Americans to give him their allegiance. Because the king was the one link to the empire that Americans had said they would accept, rejecting his rule meant rejecting all political ties to Britain.

These charges were more than an attack on George III, however. They were also an attack on the idea that people should be ruled by kings at all. Americans deserved a different kind of government. It would rely only on the consent of the people, not the wishes and orders of a distant king.

Congress was unwilling to approve one other charge in Jefferson's draft of the Declaration. This was to blame the British monarchy for its role in promoting the slave trade between Africa and America. Jefferson may have wanted to use this charge to awaken his fellow citizens to the evils of slavery. But he himself was a slave owner, as were other members of Congress. Delegates knew that many of their fellow citizens still considered slavery legal and necessary. To blame the king for their own actions seemed improper, even embarrassing.

**Free and Independent States**

The third part of the Declaration explained what Congress was now going to do. Before, Americans had tried to resolve their differences with Britain peacefully. They had sent petitions to Britain. They had tried to explain to the British government and people why they should be allowed to enjoy the rights they claimed. All those efforts had failed, and war had begun. Therefore, the Declaration concluded, "these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states." As such, they were equal in authority with all the other nations of the world.