

# Analysis of the Declaration of Independence

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"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" and "all men are created equal" are a couple of phrases from the Declaration of Independence that many Americans know by heart. These phrases are parts of philosophies that inspired the very foundation of the American government. A close reading of arguably the most important document in the early history of the United States can tell us more about what kind of government the founding fathers wanted.

In a way, the Declaration of Independence is like a break-up letter or an email sent to a boss after a long time working a hated job. "I quit!" it says. "And here's why." The Declaration is an interesting document to read, even more than two centuries after it was written.

The intellectual foundation of the Declaration is explained in just a few sentences in the second paragraph. "All men are created equal," writes author Thomas Jefferson. And everyone has basic rights that cannot be taken away, including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Any government that tries to deny those rights to its people is a government that should not deserve to exist. Perhaps the most revolutionary idea in this paragraph comes in the statement that a government's power derives "from the consent of the governed." To make such a statement to England's King George III, who believed that his right to rule came from God, was quite a bold move.

In the 18th century, this was cutting-edge philosophy, the sort of thing that French intellectuals like Voltaire and Rousseau might have discussed in Parisian coffee houses. However, Jefferson spends a few lines on these matters before moving on to the nitty-gritty: a list of complaints that he refers to as "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations." After decades of monarchical rule, the colonists became angry at how they were being ruled, and they weren't going to take it anymore. These complaints give insight into the sort of things that bothered the colonists by 1776. Let's look at a few specific lines and think a little bit about what they mean.

In one of the first complaints, the king is accused of holding legislative meetings "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" from their ordinary locations. This is a reference to specific occasions in Massachusetts and Virginia, where regular legislative meeting places were changed to locations so inconvenient that most of the lawmakers could not make the journey. If they did make the long trip, they would be too tired to argue with unjust decision-making. "Fatiguing them into compliance with [the king's] measures," writes Jefferson, was the "sole purpose" for moving these public meetings around.

The right for people to watch their government in action has been an important part of American democracy ever since. This is why local city council meetings are generally open to the public and why even small government decisions—the altering of a school district, for instance—must be preceded by a public hearing. When citizens speak at such a hearing, they are able to do so because of the colonists who demanded that public meetings be held in convenient locations.

Most of the first part of the list concerns similar bureaucratic complaints. The king controlled the appointment and payment of judges, making them more likely to rule in his favor. He passed laws making it difficult for new colonists to immigrate. When colonial lawmakers complained about such injustices, the king would dissolve their "Representative Houses...for opposing with manly firmness" his policies. These are all important complaints, but they only make up the first part of the list of complaints. Jefferson then mentions the continued presence of the king's soldiers in the colonies.

After the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British armies were not dissolved. Instead, they remained in the colonies. A "standing army" was maintained to supposedly guard against French or Indian aggression, though the colonists suspected it was intended to limit their freedom. Several entries in the middle of the list of grievances are taken up by complaints about the presence of these soldiers.

"He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power," Jefferson writes—a way of saying that it was like the colonies had been converted to a military dictatorship, because the king's armies were not under the control of local governments. Then, it gets worse. Jefferson blasts the king "for Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us," a reference to the Quartering Acts of 1765 and 1774, which required local governments to house and feed British soldiers.

As the colonists saw it, these protections given to the British army were not just a matter of money or privacy, but of justice. Because of the Administration of Justice Act of 1774, popularly known as the "Murder Act," British officials accused of crimes in Massachusetts could be tried in Britain. This meant that a British soldier could kill a colonist and escape trial by local jury, instead being tried in front of a more friendly English court. In his next complaint, Jefferson refers to this as "a mock trial."

The colonists were so incensed by the Quartering Act that, after the Revolutionary War was finished, they wrote a special amendment to the new Constitution to prevent such a law from ever being passed in the United States. It read: "No Soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." This was so important to the founders that they made it the Third Amendment, following only the freedom of speech and the right to bear arms.

When the Declaration of Independence was written and ratified in the summer of 1776, the Revolutionary War had already begun. The Battle of Bunker Hill had occurred the year before, upon which the king declared the colonies in open rebellion. He sent his army and navy to contain the revolt and hired Hessian mercenaries from Germany to supplement his forces. The response to these actions concludes Jefferson's list, and it is here his strength as a writer becomes most apparent.

He accuses the king of "waging War against us," saying that "he has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of the people." The hiring of the Hessians draws even sharper comment, as Jefferson refers to "large Armies of foreign Mercenaries [coming] to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation."

Although a written document, the Declaration of Independence was intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies as a way of inciting frustrated citizens to rebel against their king. For this reason, it makes sense that it starts slowly, introducing the intellectual argument calmly, before steadily rising to a fever pitch of rage and indignation. Even listeners unmoved by the opening paragraphs—the now famous ones—would be excited by this talk of death and destruction and tyranny.

The Declaration of Independence was not solely meant to serve as a nation's founding document. It was to be used to raise an army and protect a rebellion that had just barely begun.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1.** With what does the Declaration of Independence begin?

- A) an angry tirade against the King
- B) a list of complaints
- C) a philosophical argument
- D) the history of the colonies

**2.** What does the passage describe?

- A) the impact of the Declaration of Independence on the war efforts of the colonists
- B) the organization of the Declaration of Independence and the historical context in which it was written
- C) the reaction of the British monarchy to the Declaration of Independence
- D) the French and Indian War and its impact on the relationship between the colonists and the British monarchy

**3.** Thomas Jefferson was not afraid to make daring statements in the Declaration of Independence. What evidence from the text best supports this conclusion?

- A) Jefferson stated that a government's power derives "from the consent to be governed."
- B) Jefferson began the Declaration of Independence with an intellectual argument, then listed specific bureaucratic complaints.
- C) Jefferson claimed that public meetings were being moved around on purpose.
- D) Jefferson complained about the presence of the king's soldiers in the colonies.

**4.** How did Thomas Jefferson intend for the colonists to feel after hearing the Declaration of Independence read aloud?

- A) indifferent and bored
- B) outraged and eager to act
- C) sympathetic and guilty
- D) disappointed and hopeless

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A) The Declaration of Independence was full of cutting edge philosophy and a reminder of the intellectual reasons the colonists broke from the crown.
- B) The Declaration of Independence contains the entire history of the colonies and gives a detailed account of what was happening at that time period.
- C) The Declaration of Independence listed various complaints against the British crown that led the colonists to break from the British government.
- D) The Declaration of Independence showed how enraged Thomas Jefferson was at the many laws that were unfairly imposed on the colonists.

6. Read the following sentences: “Although a written document, the Declaration of Independence was intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies as a way of **inciting** frustrated citizens to rebel against their king. For this reason, it makes sense that it starts slowly, introducing the intellectual argument calmly, before steadily rising to a fever pitch of rage and indignation. Even listeners unmoved by the opening paragraphs—the now famous ones—would be excited by this talk of death and destruction and tyranny.”

As used in the passage, what does the word “**inciting**” most nearly mean?

- A) stirring up
- B) discouraging
- C) preventing
- D) questioning

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The Quartering Act greatly incensed the colonists; \_\_\_\_\_, they made a special amendment to the new Constitution to ensure a law like this was never passed again.

- A) moreover
- B) initially
- C) namely
- D) consequently

**8.** In the Declaration of Independence, the king is accused of holding legislative meetings "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" from their ordinary locations.

What right has become an important part of American democracy ever since this complaint was written?

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**9.** Why was the Declaration of Independence intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies?

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**10.** The author writes that the Declaration of Independence was "used to raise an army and protect a rebellion that had just barely begun."

Explain why the Declaration of Independence would be an effective tool in these efforts. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

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