The Declaration of Independence


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In June 1776 the Continental Congress, influenced by the suggestion of Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, appointed a five-person committee to write a document declaring the colonies’ independence. The committee included John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston. Jefferson was the primary author of the document.

The Declaration of Independence defined what colonists believed to be their rights, spelled out their complaints against Britain, and declared that the colonies were free and independent. The Declaration captured the spirit of Thomas Paine’s ideas by strongly criticizing King George III for depriving the colonists of trial by jury, imposing taxes without the colonists’ consent, dissolving colonial charters and legislatures, and committing two dozen other alleged crimes.

The writers of the document also drew inspiration from Enlightenment philosophers who thought that government was a social contract between people and their ruler. The best governments, these philosophers said, were those that respected the “natural rights” of individuals—basic rights such as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Britain’s John Locke had added that if the people determined that their ruler or form of government was corrupt, the people had a right to overthrow it. Thus, the authors of the Declaration claimed that King George III was “unfit to be the ruler of a free people” and said it was “their duty, to throw off such Government.” On July 4, 1776, members of the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence, dissolving all allegiance to the British Crown and creating the United States of America.

California History Standards

8.1 Students understand the major events preceding the founding of the nation and relate their significance to the development of American constitutional democracy.

8.2. Analyze the philosophy of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence, with an emphasis on government as a means of securing individual rights (e.g., key phrases such as “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”).

The guiding question

What philosophy motivated our forefathers to write the Declaration of Independence and how did it inspire the colonists to break away from England’s rule?