Understanding the Declaration of Independence

Annotation

In an 1825 letter to Richard Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, discussed who deserved credit for the ideas contained in that document. Looking back to the early years of the American Revolution, Jefferson related how the decision "to resort to arms for redress" of American grievances led patriots of the American cause to issue "an appeal to the tribunal of the world" with an eye towards explaining and justifying the American actions.

*This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before, but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, not yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind; and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its [sic] authority rests on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, & c.*

—Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825

Reflecting back forty-nine years after the fact, did Jefferson accurately portray the process that went into the creation of the Declaration of Independence? If so, what were those "harmonizing sentiments of the day" to which he referred? This lesson plan looks at the major ideas in the Declaration of Independence, their origins, the Americans' key grievances against the King and Parliament, their assertion of sovereignty, and the Declaration's process of revision. Upon completion of the lesson, you will be familiar with the document's origins, and the influences that produced Jefferson's "expression of the American mind."

This lesson plan is divided into two parts:

- **Activity 1**: The structure of the Declaration: introduction, main political/philosophical ideas, grievances, assertion of sovereignty
- **Activity 2**: The ideological/political origins of the ideas in the Declaration

Guiding Questions

1. What are the major ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence?
2. What are some of the sources for the language and ideas found in the Declaration of Independence?

**Activity 1 - the Declaration's Key Ideas**

1. Using a copy of the *Declaration of Independence* and *Was the Revolution Justified? (the Grievances Made Simple)*:
   - As a whole-class exercise, we will do a guided reading of the introduction to the Declaration of Independence, with me modeling how to decipher language and "explain" its meaning and significance, i.e. what is the main idea in this first part, why is it here, and WHY is it important?
Then, in groups, you will read the next section (starting with "We hold these truths...), which contains references to natural rights, the social contract, and the right to revolution. Identify and locate the three major concepts in the text; then re-write them in their own words and explain how they relate to the struggle between the English and American colonists. How revolutionary were these ideas in two respects: why were these ideas unusual and new? Once you have identified these references, we will discuss what each one of these terms means in greater depth.

2. In groups, you will analyze the list of grievances (using the original text and the Digital History version). Each student/group will categorize each grievance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Grievance #</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King George's Abuse of Power</td>
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<td>King and Parliament acting</td>
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<td>Together</td>
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<td>King George's War Crimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infringement of Colonial Rights</td>
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3. Whole class guided reading of the conclusion, focusing on assertions of popular sovereignty/self-determination.

Activity 2. The Declaration's Origins: Three (3) Primary Sources for Understanding the Declaration of Independence

Much of the language and many of the ideas in the Declaration can be found in other documents, to which Jefferson and the other writers had access. In this activity, you will be able to see these influences and understand the evolution of ideas over time that culminated in the Declaration.

1. We will read/discuss an interview with the primary editor of your textbook – Pauline Maier.

2. You will be using your copy of the Declaration of Independence (to be annotated), copies of three brilliantly chosen relevant documents below, and a chart to record information.

3. As you read each of the four documents, search for the portion of the Declaration that was influenced by the document's text. You will compare the Declaration's ideas with these other documents. You should analyze the extent of the connection and influence of the ideas in your document to the wording in specific sections of the Declaration.

4. In addition, you will fill in the accompanying chart to document the accumulation of ideas leading to the Declaration.

5. After you have finished, I will project a copy of the Declaration(s) to enable you to see the extent to which the ideas in the final document came from these earlier ones.
1. John Locke's Second Treatise on Government, Section 225, 1690. In this excerpt, Locke explains under what circumstances the people have the right to alter their form of government.

225. Secondly: I answer, such revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs. Great mistakes in the ruling part, many wrong and inconvenient laws, and all the slips of human frailty will be borne by the people without mutiny or murmur. But if a long train of abuses, prevarications, and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but feel what they lie under, ...it is not to be wondered that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavour to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected, and ...ancient names .. are much worse than the state of Nature or pure anarchy...

2. Massachusetts Slave Petition, May 27, 1774, Founder's Constitution. In this slave petition to the governing bodies of Massachusetts, the natural rights argument is made boldly by a people denied ANY rights at that time. (You should focus on arguments at the beginning and end of the petition.)

The Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and christian Country

Humbly Shewing

That your Petitioners apprehind we have in common with all other men a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest frinds and sum of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land. Thus are we deprived of every thing that hath a tendency to make life even tolerable, the endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or mestreses thinkes proper marred or onmarred. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent maney miles from us wear we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life which sumtimes is vere short by Reson of Being dragged from their mothers Breest ...We therefor Bage your Excellency and Honours will give this its deu weight and consideration and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be pessed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our children be set at lebety at the yeare of Twenty one for whoues sekes more pетеqueley your Petitioners is in Duty ever to Pray.

3. George Mason and the Virginia Declaration of Rights, June 12, 1776. This document was passed a little more than three weeks before the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress. (You should focus on the first three clauses of this Declaration of Rights to see how it resembles the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence).

Virginia Declaration of Rights

I. That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.
II. That all power is vested in, and consequently derived from, the people; that magistrates are their trustees and servants, and at all times amenable to them.

III. That government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community; of all the various modes and forms of government that is best, which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety and is most effectually secured against the danger of maladministration; and that, whenever any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Doc.</th>
<th>Key Phrase</th>
<th>Evidence in Dec. of Ind.</th>
<th>Connection/Analysis:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locke's 2nd Treatise</td>
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<td>Explain the difference/similarities between the source doc and the Dec. of Ind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass. Slave Petition</td>
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<td>VA Dec of Rights</td>
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