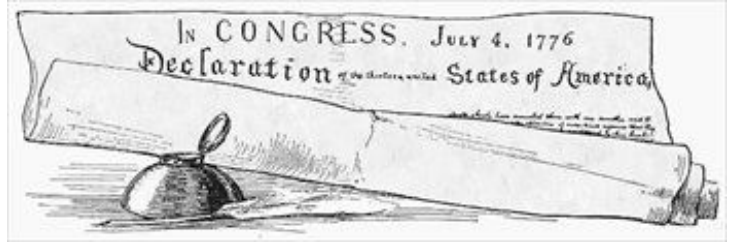


**Declaration of Independence:  
Background and Overview**

*Background:* If you remember your colonial history in the slightest, you might recall that once long ago, the U.S. was a colony of Great Britain. In the 1770s, the colonists grew increasingly unhappy with Britain's rule. This was in part because the colonies were not represented in the British Parliament. They were also being forced to pay high taxes on common items (tea, stamps, paper, sugar, etc.) to help finance Britain's wars, and in general were annoyed at being told what to do by a country that was all the way across the ocean. So, by the mid-1770s, they were talking revolution. This is a much-simplified version of events but you catch my drift.



Where we pick up... In July of 1776, Thomas Jefferson, with help from Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, drafted a formal declaration of independence from Great Britain. The document expressed ideas that had been voiced throughout the colonies in the months before.

Practically speaking, the Declaration had two purposes. In the short term, the Declaration was a public announcement to the world and to Britain that the colonies were breaking away from England and were creating the United States of America. In the long term, it established goals for society and government.

**The Declaration of Independence [EXCERPT]**

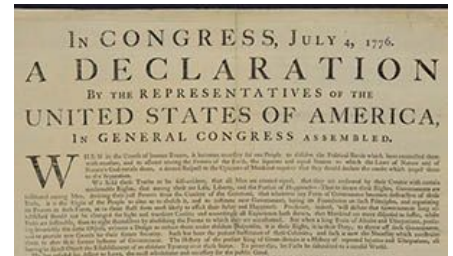
We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers 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.

**YOUR WORDS:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## Main Ideas of the Declaration of Independence

1. When it becomes necessary to get rid of one's government, you must explain why you are doing so.
2. The colonists considered it to be clear to everyone that all men are created equal and that God has given them certain basic rights that can not be taken away.
  - a. These basic rights include life, liberty (freedom), and the right to do whatever makes them happy.
  - b. Governments are built for the sole purpose of protecting these basic rights.
3. Governments are given their power by the people they govern (i.e. you cannot rule without the people's consent.)
4. If a government becomes corrupt, the people have a right to change or get rid of it and put in place a new government. (But governments should not be gotten rid of for small or unimportant reasons.)
5. In the case of the colonies, they have put up with years of abuse and misuse of power, and they therefore have the right to overthrow the British government and to establish their own government in its place.
  - c. The King of England has a long history of abusing power...[the colonists then went on to list the ways in which King George had abused his power and hurt them.]



Other important ideas that appeared in the Declaration:

**The Social Contract**—people agree to accept a government's authority. In exchange, government protects their natural rights. (Rousseau)

**Right of Rebellion**—If government violates the social contract by abusing peoples' rights, citizens have the right to rebel and create a new government.