

## THOMAS JEFFERSON

### Draft of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776)

*Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), a Virginia planter and lawyer who emerged from the Revolution renowned as an American statesman and philosopher, levied his first major charge against the British government when he wrote A Summary View of the Rights of British America in 1774. While arguing against Parliament’s power, however, he still promoted allegiance to the king. Two years later he advocated the severance of that tie. After Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia to the Continental Congress, made the resolution that the colonies were and had the right to be independent states, the congress created a committee to draft a declaration to that effect. The committee, in turn, handed over the task to the person they believed most suited to it: Jefferson. A product of his period and place, Jefferson wrote later in 1825 that in the Declaration of Independence he had attempted to produce “an expression of the American Mind.” Other congressional delegates had their own interpretations and agendas, however, and insisted on alterations. Jefferson recorded the changes that were made to the draft he submitted by underlining and sometimes bracketing what the delegates omitted and showing what they added in the margins.*

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A Declaration by the representatives of the United states of America, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate & equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & 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, & to institute new government, laying it’s foundation on such principles, & organising it’s powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. prudence indeed will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable than to right them-

^ certain

selves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. but when a long train of abuses & usurpations [begun at a distinguished period and] pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & such is now the necessity which constrains them to <sup>^</sup> [expunge] their former systems of government. the history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of <sup>^</sup> [unremitting] injuries & usurpations, [among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest but all have] <sup>^</sup> in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this let facts be submitted to a candid world [for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.]

<sup>^</sup> alter

<sup>^</sup> repeated

<sup>^</sup> all having

he has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome & necessary for the public good.

he has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate & pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; & when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

he has refused to pass other laws for the accomodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, & formidable to tyrants only.

he has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

he has dissolved representative houses repeatedly [& continually] for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

he has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected, whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise, the state remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without & convulsions within.

he has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, & raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

he has <sup>^</sup> [suffered] the administration of justice [totally to cease in some of these states] <sup>^</sup> refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

<sup>^</sup> obstructed

<sup>^</sup> by

he has made [our] judges dependant on his will alone, for the tenure of their offices, & the amount & payment of their salaries.

he has erected a multitude of new offices [by a self assumed power] and sent hither swarms of new officers to harrass our people and eat out their substance.

he has kept among us in times of peace standing armies [and ships of war] without the consent of our legislatures.

he has affected to render the military independant of, & superior to the civil power.

he has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions & unacknoleged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; for protecting

them by a mock-trial from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; for imposing taxes on us without our consent; for depriving us <sup>^</sup> of the benefits of trial by jury; for transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offences; for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging it's boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these <sup>^</sup> [states]; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, & declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

<sup>^</sup> in many cases

he has abdicated government here <sup>^</sup> [withdrawing his governors, and declaring us out of his allegiance & protection]

<sup>^</sup> colonies

he has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, & destroyed the lives of our people.

<sup>^</sup> by declaring us out of his protection & waging war against us.

he is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation & tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy <sup>^</sup> unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

<sup>^</sup> scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, & totally

he has constrained our fellow citizens taken captive on the high seas to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends & brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

<sup>^</sup> excited domestic insurrections amongst us, & has

he has <sup>^</sup> endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, & conditions [of existence.]

[he has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow-citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture & confiscation of our property.]

he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither, this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paving off former crimes committed against the Liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.]

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injuries. a prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a <sup>^</sup> people [who mean to be free. future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad & so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered & fixed in principles of freedom.]

<sup>^</sup> free

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren, we have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend  $\wedge$  [a] jurisdiction over  $\wedge$  [these our states,] we have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration & settlement here, [no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expence of our own blood & treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league & amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: and,] we  $\wedge$  appealed to their native justice and magnanimity  $\wedge$  [as well as to] the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations which  $\wedge$  [were likely to] interrupt our connection and correspondence. they too have been deaf to the voice of justice & of consanguinity, [and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, re-established them in power, at this very time too they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only souldiers of our common blood, but Scotch & foreign mercenaries to invade & destroy us. these facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. we must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind enemies in war, in peace friends. we might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity, be it so, since they will have it. the road to happiness & to glory is open to us too. we will tread it apart from them, and]  $\wedge$  acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our [eternal] separation  $\wedge$  !

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mies in war, in  
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We therefore the representatives of the United states of America in General Congress assembled do in the name, & by the authority of the good people of these [states reject & renounce all allegiance & subjection to the kings of Great Britain & all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them: we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us & the people or parliament of Great Britain: & finally we do assert & declare these colonies to be free & independant states,] & that as free & independant states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, & to do all other acts &

We therefore the representatives of the United states of America in General Congress assembled, appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do in the name, & by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish & declare that these United colonies are & of right ought to be free & independant states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them & the state of Great Britain is, & ought to be, totally dissolved; & that as free & independant states they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce & to do all other acts & things

things which independant states may of right do. and for the support of this declaration we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes & our sacred honour.

which independant states may of right do. and for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes & our sacred honour.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the charges against the king? Why were most of the condemnations addressed against him?
2. How did Jefferson's interpretation of the American mind differ from that presented by the Continental Congress via its alterations? Which version appears to be the harsher condemnation of the British government and people? Why?
3. What does this difference suggest about American perceptions and feelings toward the mother country?
4. What is distinctive about the approved concluding paragraph versus the one proposed by Jefferson? What does this difference reveal about the original author and those who altered his document?
5. How did the declaration justify independence?
6. Is this a document of construction as well as destruction? How so?
7. Does it reveal one unified nation and people or a group of states and peoples working together?