

The Declaration of Independence

As you read the text, consider how the author develops an argument for independence that reflects his perspective on the nature and purpose of government. Try to identify the evidence he uses to support his argument. Think about how Jefferson defines rights and how government relates to those rights.

The questions you see in the margin will guide your note-taking and help you see the evidence and reasoning Jefferson uses. Definitions for some non-academic vocabulary words and phrases can be found at the bottom of the page.

Second Continental Congress, July 4, 1776

In Congress, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

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 and 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.

Check Your Understanding

Use the space below the first paragraph to rewrite what Jefferson is saying in your own words.

Academic Vocabulary

Find the phrase "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" in this paragraph. Use context clues within the text to determine what Jefferson means.

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Source Analysis

Highlight or underline the phrase in this paragraph that explains why Jefferson wrote this document.

- dissolve: bring to an end*
- entitle: establish a right to*
- impel: force or urge*

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.

Check Your Understanding

Circle the specific rights that Jefferson outlines in this section.

Connect to Content

Describe one way in which Jefferson's description of rights relates to your understanding of the American governmental system.

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Academic Vocabulary

What does Jefferson mean by *Liberty* in this context?

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—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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

Check Your Understanding

Describe one characteristic of government that Jefferson mentions.

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Source Analysis

Explain one claim Jefferson makes about the purpose of government.

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self-evident: evident without proof or reasoning

unalienable: incapable of being given up

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, 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, and to provide new Guards for their future security. —Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

Source Analysis

According to Jefferson, under what conditions are the people justified in throwing off a government?

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Source Analysis

What does the text on this page tell us about Jefferson's perspective on government?

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evinces: reveals or shows clearly

usurpations: to take or make use of without right

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them....

...

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 injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people....

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, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political Connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved . . .

Check Your Understanding

Here, Jefferson names a series of grievances or complaints against the King. How does this list relate to Jefferson's earlier assertions about the nature and purpose of government?

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Source Analysis

How does Jefferson use these grievances as evidence to support his claim?

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After You Read

Thinking Like a Political Scientist

Reasoning Process: Describe

Based on the reading, describe two characteristics Jefferson applies to a government.

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What traits does Jefferson use to describe bad government?

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Political Science Disciplinary Practices

Source Analysis

What was Jefferson's claim?

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What evidence did he use to support his claim?

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What line of reasoning is Jefferson using to structure his argument - causation or comparison? How do you know?

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How does the evidence used by Jefferson relate to and support the claim?

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