

# The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was written because the colonists had been unsuccessful in gaining from England those rights and privileges which they, as Englishmen, felt they deserved, and which they enjoyed to a large extent until 1763. The colonists were willing to risk war to secure those rights.

The Peace of Paris, which ended the French and Indian War in 1763, was the beginning of a change in the British attitude toward the American colonies. Existing laws, long ignored by the colonists, were suddenly enforced, and taxes were levied by Parliament to help pay for the expensive war that had just been concluded. In addition, the British acted to curb the authority of the colonial legislatures.

When the First Continental Congress failed to bring about the fair treatment the delegates demanded from England, the Second Continental Congress was held in May of 1775. The delegates agreed that a declaration of independence was needed. Thomas Jefferson was asked to draw up a draft of the document. He drew extensively on the works of John Locke, the English philosopher, who stated in 1688 that men are by nature free, equal, and independent of each other. The Declaration states that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed . . . with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." It also asserts that the purpose of government is to secure and protect those rights and that the people may refuse to obey an unjust government, may "alter or abolish it," and may replace it with another government of their own.

There were varying reactions to the Declaration of Independence. While the patriots rejoiced, the majority of the population in America was not initially supportive. Many were indifferent, particularly those living on the frontier, since they were not directly affected by Parliament's legislation. It is estimated that a third of the population remained loyal to Great Britain. These colonists were called Tories or loyalists. Thousands left the colonies to travel to Canada, the British West Indies, or to return to England. They left behind all they had worked for and owned in the American colonies.

*Answer the questions below about the Declaration of Independence.*

1. What does the Declaration of Independence state is the purpose of government? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What happened to many of the colonists who opposed the Declaration of Independence?

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What were these colonists called? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What were those who supported the Declaration of Independence called? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What part did John Locke play in the Declaration of Independence? \_\_\_\_\_

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## *Declaration of Independence: Simplified*

Directions: Match the quotations from the *Declaration of Independence* on the left with the simplified meaning on the right.

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|--|------------------------------------|
| _____ 1. "dissolve the political bands"                        | a. This stuff is obvious           |
| _____ 2. "...by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" | b. Break up the relationship       |
| _____ 3. "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind"         | c. God gave everyone rights        |
| _____ 4. "We hold these truths to be self-evident"             | d. All people are born equal       |
| _____ 5. "...consent of the governed"                          | e. We owe the world an explanation |
| _____ 6. "...all men are created equal"                        | f. Power comes from the people     |