

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

After more than a decade of growing tension, in April of 1775 the American Revolution began with the clash between British and American troops at the battles of Lexington and Concord. In the following months Americans vigorously debated whether the colonies should declare their independence from Great Britain. Many had misgivings but gradually those favoring independence gained the upper hand.

The debate ended in June and early July 1776. On June 7 Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, acting on instructions from the Virginia Convention, proposed an independence resolution to the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia. On July 2 the congress voted 12-0 in favor of independence, with only the delegation from New York abstaining. Two days later the congress voted by the same margin to accept the Declaration of Independence, largely the work of the Virginia planter Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration powerfully stated humanity's right to revolution and eloquently justified the colonies' actions. New York ultimately made the vote for independence unanimous, when on July 9 the New York Provincial Congress approved Jefferson's declaration.

Questions for analysis: Answer the questions below based on your reading of the Declaration of Independence. There is no need to write the answers out. Please print out a copy of the Declaration (see class website) and highlight/annotate directly on the document.

1. According to Jefferson, what are the purposes of government?
2. Under what circumstances is it justifiable for a people to abolish its government?
3. Why, according to the Declaration, would constant overthrow or rebellion not be a problem?
4. Identify what you believe to be the most important grievances listed in the Declaration. Identify 6 and be able to explain why?
5. How do you know that the colonists had, in the past, attempted to have problems, issues, and grievances addressed by the British government?
6. Identify any 3 passages or phrases that clearly reflect what you know about the beliefs and values of the Enlightenment and/or specifically the writings of John Locke.