

A. Main Ideas Behind the Declaration of Independence

Main Ideas

The Declaration of Independence has four parts. The Preamble states that the colonists believe it necessary to explain why they are declaring their independence from Great Britain, so they have written this document. The next part explains the political ideas behind their action. Thomas Jefferson borrowed many of these ideas from French and British thinkers of the era, a time in history known as the Enlightenment. The third, and longest, part lists all the charges against the king, and the fourth part lists all the rights that the new nation is claiming for itself.

Students should be familiar (at a minimum) with the beginning of the second part:

“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.”

This second section continues with some words that may be less familiar to students but are no less important to the foundation of the nation:

That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that is,

whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect [bring about] their safety and happiness.

In general, the signers of the Declaration and the framers of the later Constitution were educated men who drew on ancient Greek and Roman ideas about government. They also read the works of British Whigs Trenchard and Gordon and European philosophers and political theorists of the Enlightenment period, such as Locke, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. The underlying idea of the Enlightenment was that reason was the basis of all knowledge, and all received ideas could and should be tested by reason. Instead of just accepting preexisting political institutions, Enlightenment political thinkers urged that reason be used to evaluate political ideas and institutions.

It was the ideas of philosophers such as John Locke in England and Louis, Baron de Montesquieu in France to which Thomas Jefferson turned in writing the Declaration. Jefferson based the Declaration on the theory of natural rights, which argued that every human being has certain basic rights that belong to the person by virtue of his or her being human. From this assumption, Jefferson pursued a logical argument that people institute government to preserve these rights. When government no longer safeguards these rights, he asserted, people have a right to change the government.

“All Men Are Created Equal”

This is the basic assumption in the Declaration: every human is equal to every other by virtue of one’s humanity. However, this does not mean that every person should necessarily have the same amount of education, money, or possessions, in material terms. It is also important to note that in the 18th century, not all people were considered equal. For example, women and African Americans did not receive equal treatment.

Natural Rights

What rights does a person have by virtue of being human? The first sentence of the Declaration identifies these rights as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Declaration states that these are unalienable (“inalienable” in some versions)—that is, they cannot be taken away by any person or government. It is important to note that the signers agreed that these rights were only *examples* of the rights people have.

Government’s Responsibility

The second sentence of the second section of the Declaration states, “That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men” According to the Declaration, people establish governments in order to ensure that their rights are guaranteed and protected; that is the purpose of government.

“Right of the People . . . to Institute a New Government”

If a government does not protect the rights of its citizens, asserts the Declaration, then its citizens have the right “to alter or abolish it” and to establish a new government. Jefferson explains in the next few sentences that changing a government structure is not something to be done lightly. He then outlines a long

list of the king's abuses, including the following:

- quartering large bodies of armed troops among the colonists
- cutting off colonists' trade with all parts of the world
- imposing taxes on colonies without their consent
- depriving colonists, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury