Thomas Jefferson

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

1776

While revolutionary theorist Thomas Paine continued to rally support for colonial separation from Great Britain, writing in great measure on the essential principles of self-government and the necessary defense of national sovereignty, conflict nonetheless continued to rage among the colonies over the issue of independence. By June 1776, delegates in the Continental Congress realized the imminent necessity of declaring on behalf of the colonies the right to liberate the land from the grip of British oppression, authorizing the drafting of a formal document that would solidify the decision to form a free republic based upon the natural rights principles promoted by the Enlightenment. Liberty, equality, and justice became the rallying cry for colonial independence and from which Jefferson would design the most memorable first paragraphs of the Declaration. Drawn from their philosophical foundations of nature and reason, “self-evident truths,” the God-given right of all to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” and the importance of establishing governmental power by democratic consent, these ideals were clarified in the first draft submitted to Congress on June 28. The text followed in detail with the many grievances the colonies held toward British dominance, described as “a long train of abuses and usurpations” charged in large part to King George III and his interminable despotism. Jefferson’s first draft was discussed at length and various sections were debated and revised by the Congress. Out of this process the final version emerged and was ratified on July 4, 1776. Notably, the words condemning slavery were stricken from the original text as support for its dissolution had waned in view of the urgent demand that all colonial states form their own sovereign governments. With the dawn of national independence on the horizon, statehood would materialize via the drafting of new Articles, these structuring the “Confederation and Perpetual Union” of the newly independent states. As adopted but not fully ratified until 1781, the Articles of Confederation set down the terms of equality ensuring each state a vote in the Continental Congress and importantly served to unify the states throughout the Revolutionary War and the postwar period; their terms also seeded the origins of the federal government of the United States, soon to be codified in the American Constitution in 1788.

[Note: The text is taken from Jefferson’s Autobiography. The form of the Declaration as reported is printed in roman type, the parts stricken by Congress are bracketed in italics, while the parts substituted are in capitals.]
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.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that
they are endowed by their Creator with CERTAIN [inherent and] inalienable
rights; that among these are life, liberty, and 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, 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 shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils
are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are
accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and 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, 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 [expunge] their former systems of government. The
history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of REPEATED
[unremitting] injuries and usurpations, ALL HAVING [among which appears no
solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have] 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].

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.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of
people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the
legislature, a right inestimable to them, and 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 [and 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 meantime,
exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without and 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, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has OBSTRUCTED [suffered] the administration of justice by [totally to cease in some of these states] refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made [our] judges dependent on his will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and 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 harass 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 independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged 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 IN MANY CASES 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 its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these COLONIES [states]; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here BY DECLARING US OUT OF HIS PROTECTION, AND WAGING WAR AGAINST US [withdrawing his governors, and declaring us out of his allegiance and protection].

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy SCARCELY PARALLELED IN THE MOST BARBAROUS AGES, AND TOTALLY unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

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 and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has EXCITED DOMESTIC INSURRECTION AMONG US, AND HAS 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 and conditions [of existence].

[He has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture and confiscation of our property.]

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself; violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur
miserable death in their transportation hither. 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 and 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 paying 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 FREE 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 and so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered and fixed in principles of freedom.]

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 AN UNWARRANTABLE [a] jurisdiction over us [these our states]. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here, [no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expense of our own blood and 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 and 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 HAVE appealed to their native justice and magnanimity AND WE HAVE CONJURED THEM BY [as well as to] the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations which WOULD INEVITABLY [were likely to] interrupt our connection and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. WE MUST THEREFORE [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 soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenary to invade and destroy us. These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur and of freedom, it seems, is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness and to glory is open to us, too. We will tread it apart from them, and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our [eternal] separation AND HOLD THEM AS WE HOLD THE REST OF MANKIND, ENEMIES IN WAR, IN PEACE FRIENDS!

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 the 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; [states reject and renounce all allegiance and subjection to the kings of Great Britain and all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them; we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us and the people or parliament of Great Britain: and finally we do assert and declare these colonies to be free and independent states,] and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent 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, and our sacred honor.

Headnote: Diana Jonmarie