

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

Preamble

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.

Statement of Beliefs

We hold these truths to be self-evident^[1], 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^[2].--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. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism^[3], 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.

List of Complaints/Grievances (goes to the bottom of pg 4)

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

There was a long-standing condition in the charters of some colonies that all resolutions passed through their legislative assemblies must receive the approval of the king before they could become law. In many instances, the king (or Parliament) refused to allow laws passed in colonial assemblies to stand. These ran the gamut from laws meant to benefit commerce to laws attempting to reduce or abolish the slave trade. Especially in the circumstance of colonial attempts to curtail slavery, the crown universally refused assent^[4].

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.

This charge is related to the first, and it deals specifically with the unfortunate and common practice of allowing laws approved by colonial assemblies to sit unattended—sometimes for years—without being either approved or refused. During that time, the colonies could not implement the new law; it was “suspended.”

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.

As the colonies grew in population, the colonial assemblies grew as well. They were representative houses based on population and elected by popular vote. The crown grew uncomfortable with the growing size of the larger colonies' legislatures and refused to allow the addition of new delegates. This robbed entire communities of

elected representation in their only local governing body. New Hampshire, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia were each restrained in this way.

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.

In Massachusetts and Virginia, on separate occasions, the governors of these colonies requested and were granted the right to call the colonial assembly to order away from their usual meeting places for the stated reason that meeting in the usual locations would be dangerous. This was likely true in part; the colonists had begun to feel very hostile toward their English governors. The result, of course, was that it made it very difficult for assemblies to meet and further disenfranchised the colonists.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

Several colonial assemblies were prorogued or totally dissolved, some more than once, for refusing to accommodate Parliament's demands. New York colonists defied the Quartering Act of 1765, and when General Gage demanded that the New York assembly force compliance, they refused. The king dissolved the assembly in January of 1766. In Virginia, the assembly was dissolved in 1769 after they approved the Virginia Resolves, a document that listed grievances against the crown. In Massachusetts, the assembly was dissolved in 1768 for refusing to stop printing and circulating an inflammatory letter written by Samuel Adams urging colonial unification against unfair taxation. It was dissolved again in 1774 as part of the Coercive Acts which were passed to punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party.

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 mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

This is the self-explanatory result of the dissolution of colonial assemblies. When the government was closed, the people would be forced to revert to government by committee or convention, and instability was the result.

He has endeavoured 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.

The English Common Law and the vague language of many of the colonial charters made it difficult for the non-English Americans to become naturalized. In addition, the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which dealt with delicate border issues between the French, the British colonies, and the Native American claims on a huge tract of northern land. The colonies took many of the conditions as a slap in the face because the land was not made available for settlement. Many colonists had already settled beyond the boundaries made by the proclamation and were forced to uproot.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

This had to do primarily with a situation in North Carolina, but several other colonies suffered the same problems. The North Carolina assembly passed a law pertaining to the establishment of courts and standards for judicial conduct. Parliament was incensed because the establishment of courts of law was a power reserved to the king alone. They shut down the colonial judiciary, and North Carolina was left with no means of trying criminals. The people of North Carolina were essentially left without any means of due process, and it caused serious anger against the Crown in that colony.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

This complaint stems from a similar problem to the previous charge. Judges could only be appointed by the Crown, so

colonists believed, and quite justifiably, that judges were more likely to rule as Parliament wished rather than as justice might demand. If the king did not like the way a judge ruled, that judge could be dismissed. Only the king had the power to get rid of a judge, so corruption would go unpunished unless the king were made aware of it and felt disposed to take notice.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance. *This is an age-old complaint against bloated governance. In order to demonstrate control over the colonies, Parliament engaged in a flurry of bureaucratic office creation in the decade leading up to the Revolution. For a people who had largely been left to self-government for more than a century, the interference was considered harassment and an overreach of governmental power.*

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures. *After the Seven Years War, the British troops, in very large numbers, did not return to England, but stayed in the colonies. This, coupled with the hostility between the colonial militias and the British troops that existed after that war, made the insult of a standing army in the colonial cities even more intolerable.*

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power. *The local colonial authorities had no power over these troops.*

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

The Quartering Act of 1765, the regiments sent to Boston in 1768 to protect the customs commissioners, and the troops sent to Boston to fulfill the provision of the Coercive Acts of 1774

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

This refers to the condition of the Coercive Acts of 1774 that stated any British soldier or official accused of murder in the colonies would be tried in England instead of in the colonial courts.

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

This refers to several things. Incidentally, it refers to the Navigation Acts and several other subsequent laws from Parliament designed to regulate commerce for the benefit of Great Britain. These regulations placed heavy duties on or outlawed altogether the importation of goods except through Great Britain. They also prevented colonists from selling exports outside of the mother country. The charge also refers to the closing Boston Harbor to all trade in 1774 as punishment for the Boston Tea Party.

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

This refers to the Sugar Act of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767, and the Tea Act of 1773.

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

In 1764, concurrent with the passing of the Sugar Act, George Grenville pushed a customs reorganization measure through Parliament that, among other things, set up an admiralty court in Halifax, Nova Scotia to try violators of customs law. These admiralty courts were tribunals without juries.

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences.

In many cases, colonists accused of a crime against British officials or troops could be extradited to England to be tried. Colonists feared, and it occasionally happened, that innocent people against whom an official or soldier had a grudge, would be shipped across the Atlantic to a place where they could not hope to receive a fair trial.

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring 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:

This charge is speaking specifically of the Quebec Act of 1774. In it, Parliament extended the Canadian border into Ohio Territory and set up a government there which gave special privileges to the Roman Catholic Church and provided no representative assembly for the people living there. This Act occurring almost simultaneously with the punitive Coercive Acts created an ominous picture of what Parliament might do to the 13 American colonies.

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

This charge is referring specifically to the Coercive Acts of 1774 that changed the charter of Massachusetts, dissolved its legislature, removed the governor and replaced him with General Gage, and shut down the port.

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

This is a direct stab at the Declaratory Act of 1766 that came directly after the repeal of the Stamp Act. In it, Parliament attempted to pre-empt any further argument about its right to tax the colonies by asserting its power to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever."

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

After the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, the king declared the colonies in open rebellion and ordered the army to squash out all resistance.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people. Colonial ships had been boarded, raided, and confiscated by the Crown on a fairly regular basis, and several towns had been literally burned down by British troops during the initial hostilities.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

By this time, the colonists were fully aware that the king had hired Hessian mercenaries to squash the rebellion in America. This charge was included to scold him for the base impropriety of sending hired thugs to deal with his own subjects.

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. *In late 1775, Parliament authorized the taking of any foreign ships doing trade with the colonies. Such merchants were declared enemies of Britain, and the crew and passengers of all such ships could be conscripted into service to the British army.*

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured 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.

The British had frequently attempted to incite slave rebellions and Indian attacks against colonists.

Statement of Prior Attempts
to Redress Grievances

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.

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 jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation^[5], and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

Declaration of Independence

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; 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.

[1]The wording, “self-evident,” was originally written as “sacred & undeniable.” This change has traditionally been attributed to Benjamin Franklin, but there is no evidence to support that rumor, and the change was made in Jefferson’s handwriting, not Franklin’s.

[2] In Thomas Jefferson’s original draft, this portion read, “life, liberty, and property.” Another member of the committee (consisting of Jefferson, John Adams, Robert R. Livingston, Roger Sherman, and Benjamin Franklin) pointed out to Jefferson that the word “property” was too full of meaning for the southern colonies, and that prudence dictated changing it to something else so that the South would not come back later and use the Declaration as proof of their legal right to perpetuate slavery. It was sage advice.

[3] In the original draft, this read, “to arbitrary power.” John Adams changed it to read, “to absolute power,” and Ben Franklin changed it again to the “to absolute despotism” that we see in the final draft.

[4] In the original draft, Jefferson added a charge in fiery language that blamed the king directly for the scourge of slavery in America. This charge did not make it into the final Declaration because the Southern delegates strenuously objected and would not agree to vote for, much less sign, any draft that included it. In Jefferson’s “Rough Draft,” this charge was placed last on the long list to give it emphasis. The wording was as follows: *He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. 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 & 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 upon 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.*

[5] Thomas Jefferson originally wrote this as “our everlasting adieu.” John Adams made him strike that out and change it to “our eternal separation.” In the final draft, the “eternal” was removed.