



## The American Declaration of Independence

What had started as a rebellion in the 13 colonies turned into a full revolution by the year 1776. Thomas Paine wrote a pamphlet that was published in January 1776 that asked whether an island should rule a continent. The Second Continental Congress in May 1776 had met to find a solution to the current dispute with the mother country. Richard Henry Lee stood and proposed a resolution to declare independence from England and king. That resolution was set aside for further study while a committee of five members was assigned to write a declaration if the Congress later voted for independence.

Thomas Jefferson was given the task of writing the declaration, and he drew on the past to make his case against the king. Two of the most notable were George Mason and John Locke and their ideas of government. When Jefferson completed his draft of the declaration, it was reviewed and changes were made. These did not always sit well with the original writer! The final document was 1,310 words long and has had a greater impact on history than other documents. One purpose for the writing was to win over other European nations to the colonist cause.

John Dickinson said that no declaration would bring any nation to the colonist side and only a show of military would provide that. He was right, for only after the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 did France join the American cause in 1778, followed by Dutch (Netherlands) and Spain. Then in 1783, the English Parliament in the Treaty of Paris recognized the independence of the United States. The Declaration of Independence has no force of law, and yet it is a concept that has changed and is still changing the world today. Some 100 nations around the world have declarations that are copies of or are modeled after our Declaration. By 1821, many new Latin American nations wrote their declarations patterned after our Declaration of Independence. New nations after the Great War also used the American declaration as a model for their new governments. Nations that won independence after World War II used the language of the Declaration of Independence when writing theirs. That same impact can be seen with the collapse of the Soviet Union and new nations.

Yet the original document has become more than what its author intended. Jefferson used the word *people* to identify Americans and English as groups. Readers after the passage read *people* as individuals. This set off other declarations and claims to these rights. In 1829, Robert Owens wrote a Utopian Declaration for mental independence; Nat Turner set July 4 as his date for a slave rebellion; the Declaration of Women's Rights was issued in 1848; Frederick Douglass in 1852 referred to the Declaration; and on July 4, in a speech on slavery, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream" is about the ideas in the Declaration of Independence.

However, it is with Abraham Lincoln that the Declaration is set in the American idea of liberty. In his Address at Gettysburg, he noted that the Battle at Gettysburg was fought on July 4. The words "Four score and seven years ago" refer back to the Declaration and not the date of the U.S. Constitution. Lincoln combined the process of the American Revolution as a continuous process.

As Thomas Jefferson said in a letter in 1824 to an individual about the Declaration, it is "an instrument pregnant ... the faith of the World."