

Declaration Preamble (July 4, 1776)

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them (1) with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature (2) 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 (3), that all men are created equal (4), that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness (5).

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed (6), That 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 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 (7), 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 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.”

Notes

1) **connected**: This refers to the relationship between the 13 colonies and Britain, the mother country. Each colony was regarded as a separate, subordinate part of England, which had the power to govern them as pleased.

2) **laws of nature**: Jefferson and the other revolutionaries justified independence based on natural law. After they had developed to a point where they could stand on their own, it was as natural for the colonies to be independent as a child leaving the home once becoming an adult, or any other process of growth in nature.

3) **self-evident**: This means requiring no proof, obvious to any person.

4) **equal**: This core statement of principle applied to free white men. Jefferson and other founders owned slaves, and, for political purposes, women at the time were regarded as extensions of their husbands, whose voices were the only one that counted in public. Although the Declaration had no binding legal power, like the provisions of the US Constitution, the ideal of equality as set forth in the Preamble became the guiding principle of equality struggles throughout American history.

5) **life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness**: This phrase was adapted from the writings of John Locke, an English political philosopher who influenced Jefferson and other revolutionary leaders. Locke stated that all men had the right to “life, liberty and property.”

6) **consent of the governed**: The people are the ultimate source of power and authority. This core principle of the new nation meant a rejection of monarchy and eventually became the basis for the formation of a republic.

7) **abuses and usurpations**: In the full Declaration of Independence, a list of colonial grievances against the English Crown follows the Preamble.

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