

PENINSULA CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

# Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

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## Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

In the summer of 1776, the Continental Congress selected a young delegate named Thomas Jefferson with a committee of notables such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to write the document that would declare America to be an independent, sovereign nation. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was also as he put it, "an expression of the American mind," and the fundamental basis of American principles. Thomas Jefferson, in writing his Declaration of Independence, relied on the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and Enlightenment philosophers who had influenced him on the ideas of self-government, laws, human nature, and natural rights.

When Thomas Jefferson was called upon by the Continental Congress to compose the Declaration of Independence, he was obviously without the advantage of his library at Monticello. He did however, possess a vast knowledge of great thinkers of western political thought shared by the majority of the classically-educated founders present. (Williams 113) James Harrington and John Locke were two Enlightenment minds who greatly influenced Jefferson. Harrington stated that most of the property of England had gradually passed from the king's ownership to the general population. He believed that whoever owned the property should control the government. This gave people in England the idea that they could make their own government, and in fact removed their king in 1688 with additional constitutional limitations in The Glorious Revolution. (Morgan 72-73) Locke, considered the greatest influence on the Declaration of Independence and American government, elaborated on the principle of natural rights and consensual government. In his *Second Treatise on Government* Locke laid out the idea that people are by nature free, equal, and independent. In the "state of nature" a man begins life with only his body and reason, but through hard work, determination, and labor, a man improves

himself and owns private property. (Morgan 73) Locke said that “so long as a shell rests on the sand of the beach, it belongs to no one; but once someone picks it up and treats it as a thing of beauty, it becomes his property.” (Locke) Locke believed all men have natural rights of life, liberty, and property. They form a social contract among the sovereign people in order to create a government for the purpose of protecting these rights given to them by their God. Since the government is instituted with the consent of the governed for a definite purpose, if any government acts tyrannically and fails to protect, or violates the natural rights, the people have a right of rebellion after a long train of abuses. (Woolhouse 288-290)

Other Founding Fathers argued for the principles of liberty and self-government before Jefferson wrote them in the Declaration of Independence. Alexander Hamilton in his pamphlet, “Farmer Refuted,” described his compact theory of government. This theory, which was heavily influenced by Locke and the English jurist William Blackstone, held that “the origin of all civil government...must be a voluntary compact between the rulers and the ruled.” Hamilton asked “how could a man govern others except by their own consent...When human laws contradict natural rights...they defeat the proper end of all laws, and so become null and void.” He stated that, “the sacred rights of man-kind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written...in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.” (Hamilton) Another thinker who influenced Jefferson was Thomas Paine. In his book *Common Sense*, Paine denounced all monarchy including the British crown. He said that the natural rights of Locke could not exist with a monarchy because the government did not represent the people. He unequivocally stated that Americans had been moving towards the expulsion of monarchy since the first time they protested a tax and that they could no longer exist peacefully with the King, Parliament, or

England. (Ellis 42-43) Paine was extremely radical in these beliefs saying that “government in its best state is a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one.” Paine was so radical that in winter of 1776, before the talk of independence had begun publically, he proposed the idea that America should fight the strongest nation on earth in a war for its independence. (Morgan 71)

The ideals which Thomas Jefferson had incorporated into his Declaration had been claimed in new state constitutions in 1776. George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights stated that “all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights...when entered into a state of society, they cannot...deprive or divest their posterity; namely the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” (Mason) Jefferson had a copy of Mason’s document when he was writing the Declaration in Philadelphia. The impetus for Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence though was Richard Henry Lee’s resolution for independence. On June 7, 1776, less than a month before the Declaration was approved by Congress, Lee stood in Congress and proclaimed that “the 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.” (Lee)

In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson and Congress laid down many fundamental principles of America. This document, which was only directed against King George III, was focused on blaming the king for acting tyrannically. He believed that the British government had broken the fundamental understanding defining their relationship as laid out in Locke’s social contract. He stated that the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, “as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate,” had

systematically been abused. Jefferson stated that “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal...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.” He believed that “single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day; but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguishable point, and pursued unalterably through every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery.” Jefferson certainly believed that America was entitled to “a separate and equal station amongst the nations of Earth.”

The Declaration of Independence has represented American principles and the rights of mankind for 235 years. It speaks beautifully of freedom, natural rights, self-government, and rebellion against tyranny. In other words, the greatest thing that the Declaration expresses of the American character is that we will not go quietly into the night in the face of oppression, but we will instead rise up and declare in one voice, the protection of our God-given rights.

Declaration of Independence.

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Kevin Sullivan is a 16 year old junior at Peninsula Catholic High School. He plays basketball and volleyball. He plans to play basketball at a 4 year university while majoring in History. He is the captain of the varsity basketball team at Peninsula Catholic. His grade point average is 3.79, and he takes Honors US History, Honors Trigonometry, Honors Earth Science, and Speech and Debate. His favorite subject is History. He is inspired by historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas More. He is also a practicing Roman Catholic.