Lesson 6

The Declaration of Independence

What principles of government are expressed in the Declaration of Independence?

Introduction

The battles at Lexington and Concord marked the start of the fighting that would lead the colonies to declare their independence from Great Britain. The day after the clashes, horseback riders galloped through the colonies with news of the “barbarous murders” of innocent militiamen, leaving most Americans deeply appalled. More urgently than ever, they debated what to do about Great Britain.

For many colonists, the two choices were clear as day. The colonies could declare their independence, or they could continue to use protests and petitions, or formal requests, to sway the minds of King George and the Parliament of Great Britain. This second choice would keep the colonies at peace, but at what cost to the colonists’ freedom?

No one was more outspoken in his support for independence than Patrick Henry of Virginia, who delivered one of the most famous speeches in American history to the Virginia House of Burgesses. “There is no longer any room for hope,” he began. “If we wish to be free ... we must fight! Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston. The war is inevitable—and let it come!”

Then Henry spoke to those who treasured peace above freedom:

*Gentlemen may cry, Peace, peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun. The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! ... What is it that gentlemen wish? ... Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!*

Despite the passionate words of Patriots like Henry, most colonists remained unsure about separating from Great Britain. In this lesson, you will learn how the fighting led many to decide to declare independence.
British soldiers marched up Breed’s Hill and eventually defeated the American forces when the colonists ran out of gunpowder. The fierce fighting proved that the British would not easily defeat the colonists.

1. The Colonists Organize an Army

On May 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. By then, New England militia had amassed around Boston. The first question facing Congress was who should command this “New England army.” The obvious answer was a New Englander.

George Washington and the Continental Army  
John Adams of Massachusetts had another idea. He proposed that Congress create a “Continental army” made up of troops from all the colonies. To lead this army, Adams nominated “a Gentleman whose Skill and Experience as an Officer, whose . . . great Talents and excellent universal Character, would [unite] the colonies better than any other person” alive. That man was George Washington of Virginia, who had distinguished himself in the French and Indian War.

The delegates agreed. They unanimously elected Washington to be commander in chief of the new Continental army.

The Battle of Bunker Hill  
Meanwhile, militiamen near Boston made plans to fortify two hills that overlooked the city: Bunker Hill and Breed’s Hill. On the night of June 16, 1775, Israel Putnam led a few hundred men up Breed’s Hill, where they furiously dug for four hours in order to erect a crude fort on the top of the hill.

The fort was concerning to British general William Howe, who had just arrived from England with fresh troops, so he ordered an immediate attack. Under a hot June sun, about 2,000 British troops formed two long lines at the base of Breed’s Hill, and, at Howe’s order, the redcoats marched up the slope.

As the lines moved ever closer, Putnam ordered his men, “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” When the British were almost on top of them, Putnam sent out the order for the militiamen to open fire. The red lines of British soldiers broke and fell back in confusion.

The British regrouped and attacked again before the Americans stopped their advances once more. On their third attack, the redcoats finally took the hill—but only because the Americans had used up all their gunpowder and retreated.
This clash, which became known as the Battle of Bunker Hill, was short but incredibly bloody. More than 1,000 British troops and nearly half that many Americans were killed or wounded in the conflict.

**General Washington Takes Command**
Shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill, George Washington took command of his new army made up of “a mixed multitude of people . . . under very little discipline, order, or government.” Washington worked hard to **impose** order. One man wrote, “Everyone is made to know his place and keep in it . . . It is surprising how much work has been done.”

A month later, however, a dismayed Washington learned that the army had only 36 barrels of gunpowder—enough for each soldier to fire just nine shots. To deceive the British, Washington started a rumor in Boston that he had 1,800 barrels of gunpowder—more than he knew what to do with! Luckily, the British believed the rumor, giving Washington time to send desperate letters to the colonies begging for gunpowder.

Washington got his powder, but he still didn't have the strength to attack the British forces in Boston. To do that he needed artillery—heavy guns, such as cannons—to bombard their defenses. In desperation, Washington sent a Boston bookseller named Henry Knox to Fort Ticonderoga to round up some big guns.

Ticonderoga was an old British fort located at the southern end of Lake Champlain in New York. A few months earlier, militiamen led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold had seized the fort, and while the Americans had little use for the run-down fort, its guns would prove priceless.

As winter set in, Knox loaded 59 cannons onto huge sleds and dragged them 300 miles to Boston. Knox’s 42 sleds also carried 2,300 pounds of lead for making bullets. Boston was about to be under siege by the Americans.

**The British Abandon Boston** On March 4, 1776, the British soldiers in Boston awoke to a frightening sight. The ridges of nearby Dorchester Heights, which had been bare the night before, now bristled with cannons, all aimed at the city.

Rather than risk another battle, General Howe abandoned the city. Within days, more than a hundred ships left Boston Harbor for Canada carrying 9,000 British troops as well as 1,100 Loyalists who preferred to leave their homes behind rather than live with rebels.

Some Americans hoped that the victory in Boston meant that the war was over. Washington, however, knew it was only the beginning.
2. On the Eve of Independence

Nearly a year passed between the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and the British retreat from Boston. During that time, there was little talk of independence. Most colonists still considered themselves loyal British subjects, and they believed their quarrel was not with Great Britain itself but with its policies toward the colonies.

The Olive Branch Petition

Many Americans pinned their hopes for peace on King George. In July 1775, the Second Continental Congress sent a petition to George III asking him to end the quarrel. John Adams called the petition an “olive branch,” which is an ancient symbol of peace.

By the time the petition reached London, however, the king had declared the colonies to be in “open and avowed Rebellion.” He ordered his ministers “to bring the Traitors to Justice.”

Being called a traitor was enough to change the mind of one of Washington’s generals, who confessed that he had long “looked with some degree of horror on the scheme of separation.” Now he agreed with Patrick Henry that colonists “must be Independent or Slaves.”

Common Sense

Many colonists, however, still looked with horror at the idea of independence. Then, early in 1776, a Patriot named Thomas Paine published a fiery pamphlet entitled *Common Sense* in which he scoffed at the idea that Americans owed any loyalty to King George. “Of more worth is one honest man to society,” he wrote, “than all the crowned ruffians who ever lived.”

Paine also attacked the argument that the colonies’ ties to Great Britain had benefited Americans. Just the opposite was true, he said. American trade had suffered under British control, and Americans had also been hurt by being dragged into Great Britain’s European wars.

Paine ended with a vision of an independent America as a homeland of liberty. “Ye that love mankind!” he urged. “Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! . . . The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth.”

Within a few months, more than 120,000 copies of *Common Sense* were printed in the colonies. Paine’s arguments helped persuade thousands of colonists that independence was not only sensible, but that it was the key to a brighter future.

3. Thomas Jefferson Drafts a Declaration

A few weeks after the British left Boston, the Second Continental Congress appointed a committee to write a declaration, or formal statement, of independence. The task of drafting the Declaration of Independence went to the committee’s youngest member, 33-year old Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. A shy man, Jefferson said little in Congress, but he stated his ideas brilliantly in writing.
Jefferson’s job was to explain to the world why the colonies were choosing to separate from Britain. “When in the Course of human events,” he began, if one group of people finds it necessary to break its ties with another, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” requires that they explain their actions.

**Principles on Which to Base a New Government**  
Jefferson’s explanation was simple but revolutionary. Loyalists had argued that colonists had a duty to obey the king, whose authority came from God. Jefferson reasoned quite differently. He based his arguments on the principle of *natural rights*, the idea that all people are born equal in God’s sight and thus are all entitled to the same basic rights. In Jefferson’s *eloquent* words,

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.

Governments are formed, Jefferson said, “to secure these rights,” and their power to rule comes from “the consent of the governed.” If a government fails to protect people’s *fundamental* rights, “it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.” The people can then create a new government that will protect “their Safety and Happiness.”

**The King’s Crimes**  
King George, Jefferson continued, had shown no concern for the rights of colonists. Instead, the king’s policies had been aimed at establishing “an absolute Tyranny over these States” (the colonies).

As evidence, Jefferson included a long list of the king’s abuses against the colonists. In all these actions, Jefferson claimed, George III had demonstrated that he was “unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

The time had come, Jefferson concluded, for the colonies’ ties to Great Britain to be broken. “These United Colonies are,” he declared, “and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.”

*natural rights*  
rights common to everyone, as opposed to those given by law.
4. The Final Break

On July 1, 1776, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia’s State House to debate independence. By noon, the temperature outside had soared into the nineties, and a thunderstorm was gathering. Inside the State House, emotions were equally hot and stormy. By the end of the day, the issue was still undecided.

The next day was cooler and calmer. On July 2, all but one of the 13 colonies voted for independence, New York casting no vote.

No delegate was more excited about the colonies’ decision than John Adams. In a letter to his wife Abigail, Adams wrote, “The second Day of July . . . will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, with Pomp and Parade, with Shews (shows), Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations, from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”

Debate over Slavery  Adams was wrong about the date that would be celebrated as America’s birthday, but only because Congress decided to revise Jefferson’s declaration. The delegates liked most of what they read, except for a passage on slavery. Jefferson had charged King George with violating the “sacred rights of life and liberty . . . of a distant people [by] carrying them into slavery.”

Almost no one liked this passage. Many southerners feared that it might lead to demands to free the slaves because enslaved Africans provided much of the labor used on southern farms. Slave trade was very profitable and many colonial merchants built fortunes trading in human beings. Northerners worried that these New England merchants might be offended. Even delegates who opposed slavery felt it was unfair to blame the king for enslaving Africans. This passage was removed from the document.
Independence Day  On July 4, the delegates approved a final version of the Declaration of Independence. When they signed the document, they pledged to support independence with “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

This was a serious pledge because every signer understood that by signing he was committing an act of treason against Great Britain. If the new nation failed to win its freedom, each of them could very well end up swinging from a hangman’s rope. Knowing this, Benjamin Franklin told the delegates, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you read how the American colonies took the dramatic step of declaring their independence.

The Colonists Organize an Army  George Washington took command of the Continental Army after the Battle of Bunker Hill. The Continental Army used cannons brought from Fort Ticonderoga in New York to force the British to abandon Boston in March 1776.

On the Eve of Independence  The failure of the Olive Branch Petition and the success of Thomas Paine’s pamphlet Common Sense moved the colonies closer to the decision to declare independence from Great Britain.

Thomas Jefferson Drafts a Declaration  Thomas Jefferson, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, was selected to write the Declaration of Independence.

The Final Break  On July 4, 1776, the delegates approved the Declaration of Independence. For the first time in history, a government was being established on the principle of people’s natural rights and the duty of government to honor those rights.