

Teaching American History Online Seminar

Jefferson: The Revolutionary

August 16th, 2025

Panelists: Todd Estes, Cara Rogers Stevens, and Jason Stevens

Reading List

- Draft of the Declaration of Independence | 1776
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee | 1825
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman | 1826
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henri Gregoire | 1809
- Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to William Short | 1793
- Excerpt from Thomas Jefferson to Lafayette | 1815
- *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Thomas Jefferson | 1774

[Link to Event](#)



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READING 1:

Draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson | 1776

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/draft-of-the-declaration-of-independence/>

Acting on instructions from the Virginia Convention, on June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee (1732–1794) stood before his fellow members of the Continental Congress to propose a resolution “that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states.” After John Adams (1735–1826) of Massachusetts seconded the motion, debate raged for two full days. Finally, Congress decided to table Lee’s resolution for three weeks in order to allow delegates to receive instructions from their legislatures. In the meantime, in the event that the resolution should pass, it appointed a committee to draft a declaration of independence. The committee consisted of Adams, Roger Sherman (1721–1793) of Connecticut, Robert R. Livingston (1746–1814) of New York, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) of Pennsylvania, and Virginia delegate Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826).

Jefferson thought that Adams should take the lead in composing a draft, but Adams disagreed. As he later recalled, he insisted that Jefferson accept the task for three reasons: “Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can.” Adams appreciated not only Jefferson’s “happy talent for composition” but also his status as the committee’s only southerner. New England delegates stood firmly behind independence. Adams himself had pushed the idea so insistently that he sensed the annoyance of certain delegates, who believed that Massachusetts, which had borne the brunt of British sanctions and gunfire, stood to gain the most from separation from Great Britain. If a popular delegate from Virginia championed independence, then maybe wavering delegates from the middle colonies and South Carolina would too.

Accepting the task, Jefferson got to work in his rented rooms at the house of Jacob Graff (1727–1780), a Philadelphia bricklayer. For nearly three weeks Jefferson worked through a succession of drafts. He wrote, revised, and sought feedback from Adams, Franklin, and finally the entire committee.

The Declaration, he later wrote, aimed “to be an expression of the American mind.” It sought “not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of ... but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent.” Not everyone assented, however. John Dickinson (1732–1808), a member of Congress who had labored mightily in opposition to British imperial policies (Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, No. II and Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms), could not bring himself to vote for independence. Considering it too much, too soon, and too sure to further inflame a war already raging out of control, he marveled at his peers’ willingness to “brave the storm in a skiff made of paper.”

On July 2, once Congress voted in favor of Lee’s resolution, it turned its attention to Jefferson’s draft. In Jefferson’s notes on the debate over the Declaration, he provided a brief account of how his draft was amended; he then transcribed the draft he had submitted to Congress to show how it had been changed. The text below includes Jefferson’s explanatory note and underlines, as Jefferson did, the parts of the Declaration deleted by Congress. In Jefferson’s original transcription, the words and phrases inserted by Congress are displayed in the margin; here they are italicized and placed within curly brackets in the body of the text.

—Robert M.S. McDonald

... Congress proceeded the same day [July 2] to consider the Declaration of Independence, which had been reported and laid on the table the Friday preceding, and on Monday referred to a committee of the whole. The

pusillanimous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with, still haunted the minds of many. For this reason, those passages which conveyed censures on the people of England were struck out, lest they should give them offense. The clause too, reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who, on the contrary, still wished to continue it. Our northern brethren also, I believe, felt a little tender under those censures; for though their people have very few slaves themselves, yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others. The debates, having taken up the greater parts of the 2rd, 3rd, and 4th days of July, were, in the evening of the last, closed; the Declaration was reported by the committee, agreed to by the House, and signed by every member present, except Mr. Dickinson. As the sentiments of men are known not only by what they receive, but what they reject also, I will state the form of the Declaration as originally reported. The parts struck out by Congress shall be distinguished by a black line drawn under them; and those inserted by them shall be placed in the margin or in a concurrent column(s).

A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled

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.

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with {*certain*} inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; 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 shown 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, begun at a distinguished period and pursuing invariably the same object, evinces^[4] 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*} expunge their former systems of government. The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of {*repeated*} unremitting injuries and usurpations, among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest but all have {*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 for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.

He has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

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.

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 the tyrants only.

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.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly and continually for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

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

He has endeavored 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.

He has {*obstructed*} suffered the administration of justice totally to cease in some of these states {*by*} refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made our judges dependent on his will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices by a self assumed power and sent hither swarms of new officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us in times of peace standing armies and ships of war without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; for protecting them by a mock trial from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; for imposing taxes on us without our consent; for depriving us {in many cases} of the benefits of trial by jury; for transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offences; for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province,^[5] 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} states; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here {by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.} withdrawing his governors, and declaring us out of his allegiance and protection.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy^[6] {scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally} unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

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.

He has {excited domestic insurrections among us, and has} endeavored 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 of existence.

He has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture and confiscation of our property.

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and 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 and 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,^[7] 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 on 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.

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 injuries.

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 who mean to be free. Future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad and so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered and fixed in principle of freedom.

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} a jurisdiction over {us} these our states. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here, no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expense of our own blood and treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league and amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: and, we {have} appealed to their native justice and magnanimity and {we have conjured them by} as well as to the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations which {would inevitably} were likely to interrupt our connection and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity, and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the

disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, re-established them in power. At this very time too, they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenaries to invade and destroy us. These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur and of freedom, it seems, is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness and to glory is open to us too. We will tread it apart from them, and {We must therefore} acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our eternal separation {and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.}!

Editor: The two final paragraphs, in their original and amended forms, were placed by Jefferson in two parallel columns. The conclusion of the Declaration as he submitted it appeared in the left column and the text as altered by Congress appeared in the right column.

[Jefferson's draft]

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, do in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these states reject and renounce all allegiance and subjection to the kings of Great Britain and all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them; we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us and the people or parliament of Great Britain: and finally we do assert and declare these colonies to be free and independent states, 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, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

[Congress's final version]

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 the 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.

READING 2:

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee | 1825

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-henry-lee/>

[W]ith respect to our rights, and the acts of the British government contravening those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American whigs thought alike on these subjects.

When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.

All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c. ...

READING 3:

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman | 1826

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-roger-c-weightman/>

RESPECTED SIR, — The kind invitation I receive from you, on the part of the citizens of the city of Washington, to be present with them at their celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence, as one of the surviving signers of an instrument pregnant with our own, and the fate of the world, is most flattering to myself, and heightened by the honorable accompaniment proposed for the comfort of such a journey. It adds sensibly to the sufferings of sickness, to be deprived by it of a personal participation in the rejoicings of that day. But acquiescence is a duty, under circumstances not placed among those we are permitted to control. I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met and exchanged there congratulations personally with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies, who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country, between submission or the sword; and to have enjoyed with them the consolatory fact, that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made. May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

READING 4:

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henri Gregoire | 1809

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-henri-gregoire/>

Dear Sir, — I have received the favor of your letter of August 17th, and with it the volume you were so kind as to send me on the "Literature of Negroes." Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re—establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family. I pray you therefore to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief; and to be assured of the sentiments of high and just esteem and consideration which I tender to yourself with all sincerity.

READING 5:

Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to William Short | 1793

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/secretary-of-state-thomas-jefferson-to-william-short/>

Thomas Jefferson served as the nation's first secretary of state from March 22, 1790, to December 31, 1793. In this capacity Jefferson clashed with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton over almost every issue confronting the new government. Jefferson feared that Hamilton was trying to infuse powers into the federal government that the drafters of the Constitution and the delegates who ratified that document had not intended.

It may seem odd that foreign policy issues would prove to be so divisive at a time when the new republic was just finding its footing. But the question of the appropriate American policy toward the French republic and its monarchical neighbors proved as divisive as the Bank of the United States or any other domestic issue. "The affairs of France & England threatened to embroil us," Jefferson later said, "and rendered consideration & discussion desirable. In these discussions, Hamilton & myself were daily pitted in the cabinet like two cocks."

Jefferson was an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution, and as early as 1790 noted that his goal was to cement the relationship between the United States and France. He wrote a correspondent in France that this was "the first wish of my heart." Taking note of the reports of atrocities from France, he added, "you have had some checks, some horrors since I left you. But the way to heaven, you know, has always been said to be strewn with thorns." In this letter written in 1793 Secretary of State Jefferson admonished William Short (whom Jefferson sometimes referred to as his "adopted son"), his longtime protégé and the current American envoy to Paris, for his critical comments regarding the tactics of the French revolutionaries. While deploring the loss of innocent life, Jefferson considered these losses to be essential to the success of a revolution upon which rested the "liberty of the whole earth." The letter makes Jefferson's zealous devotion to self-government abundantly clear.

—Stephen F. Knott

... The tone of your letters had for some time given me pain, on account of the extreme warmth with which they censured the proceedings of the Jacobins¹ of France. I considered that sect as the same with the republican patriots, and the Feuillants² as the monarchical patriots, well known in the early part of the revolution, and but little distant in their views, both having in object the establishment of a free constitution and differing only on the question whether their chief executive should be hereditary or not. The Jacobins (as since called) yielded to the Feuillants and tried the experiment of retaining their hereditary executive. The experiment failed completely and would have brought on the reestablishment of despotism had it been pursued. The Jacobins saw this, and that the expunging [of] that officer was of absolute necessity,³ and the nation was with them in opinion, for however they might have been formerly for the constitution framed by the first assembly,⁴ they were come over from their hope in it, and were now generally Jacobins. In the struggle which was necessary, many guilty persons fell without the forms of trial, and with them some innocent. These I deplore as much as anybody and shall deplore some of them to the day of my death. But I deplore them as I should have done had they fallen in battle. It was necessary to use the arm of the people, a machine not quite so blind as balls and bombs, but blind to a certain degree. A few of their cordial friends met

at their hands the fate of enemies. But time and truth will rescue and embalm their memories, while their posterity will be enjoying that very liberty for which they would never have hesitated to offer up their lives. The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is. I have expressed to you my sentiments, because they are really those of 99 in a hundred of our citizens....

There are in the U.S. some characters of opposite principles; some of them are high in office, others possessing great wealth, and all of them hostile to France and fondly looking to England as the staff of their hope. These I named to you on a former occasion. Their prospects have certainly not brightened. Excepting them, this country is entirely republican, friends to the constitution, anxious to preserve it and to have it administered according to its own republican principles. The little party above mentioned⁵ have espoused it only as a steppingstone to monarchy, and have endeavored to approximate it to that in its administration, in order to render its final transition more easy. The successes of republicanism in France have given the coup de grace to their prospects, and I hope to their projects. I have developed to you faithfully the sentiments of your country, that you may govern yourself accordingly. I know your republicanism to be pure, and that it is no decay of that which has embittered you against its votaries in France, but too great a sensibility at the partial evil by which its object has been accomplished there....

1. The members of the “Jacobin Club” were arguably the most important and most radical faction within the revolutionary movement. The Jacobins eventually were led by Maximilien Robespierre, considered to be the driving force behind the “Reign of Terror.”
2. Conservative members of the revolutionary movement who favored the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.
3. Jefferson referred to removing King Louis XVI from office (the monarchy was abolished on September 21, 1792). Louis was tried in December 1792, convicted, and then executed on January 21, 1793.
4. The French established a constitutional monarchy in 1791.
5. Hamilton and his fellow Federalists, whom Jefferson described as “monocrats and aristocrats.”

READING 6:

Excerpt of a letter from Thomas Jefferson to Lafayette | 1815

SOURCE: https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-08-02-0210#X2A568798-B1E3-40C0-B9A2-45F1FDF74B7F_REF

My Dear friend

Your letter of Aug. 14. has been recieved and read again & again with extraordinary pleasure. it is the first glimpse which has been furnished me of the interior workings of the late unexpected, but fortunate revolution of your country. the newspapers told us only that the great beast was fallen; but what part in this the patriots acted, and what the egoists, whether the former slept while the latter were awake to their own interests only, the hireling scribblers of the English press said little, and knew less. I see now the mortifying alternative under which the patriot there is placed, of being either silent, or disgraced by an association in opposition with the remains of Bonapartyism. a full measure of liberty is not now perhaps to be expected by your nation; nor am I confident they are prepared to preserve it. more than a generation will be requisite, under the administration of reasonable laws favoring the progress of knolege in the general mass of the people, and their habituation to an independant security of person and property, before they will be capable of estimating the value of freedom, and the necessity of a sacred adherence to the principles on which it rests for preservation. instead of that liberty which takes root and growth in the progress of reason, if recovered by mere force or accident, it becomes, with an unprepared people, a tyranny still, of the many, the few, or the one. possibly you may remember, at the date of the jeu de paume, how earnestly I urged yourself, and the patriots of my acquaintance, to enter then into a compact with the king, securing freedom of religion, freedom of the press, trial by jury, Habeas corpus, & a national legislature, all of which it was known he would then yield; to go home, and let these work on the amelioration of the condition of the people, until they should have rendered them capable of more, when occasions would not fail to arise for communicating to them more. this was as much as I then thought them able to bear soberly & usefully for themselves. you thought otherwise, and that the dose might still be larger. and I found you were right; for subsequent events proved they were equal to the constitution of 1791. unfortunately some of the most honest and enlightened of our patriotic friends, (but closet politicians merely, unpracticed in the knolege of man) thought more could still be obtained & borne. they did not weigh the hazards of a transition from one form of government to another, the value of what they had already rescued from those hazards, and might hold in security if they pleased, nor the imprudence of giving up the certainty of such a degree of liberty, under a limited monarch, for the uncertainty of a little more under the form of a republic. you differed from them. you were for stopping there, and for securing the constitution which the National Assembly had obtained. here too you were right; and from this fatal error of the republicans, from their separation from yourself & the Constitutionlists in their councils, flowed all the subsequent sufferings and crimes of the French nation. the hazards of a second change fell upon them by the way. the foreigner gained time to anarchize by gold the government he could not overthrow by arms, to crush in their own councils the genuine republicans, by the fraternal embraces of exaggerated and hired pretenders, and to turn the machine of jacobinism from the change, to the destruction, of order: and, in the end, the limited monarchy they had secured was exchanged for the unprincipled and bloody tyranny of Robespierre, and the equally unprincipled and maniac tyranny of Bonaparte. you are now rid of him, and I sincerely wish you may continue so. but this may depend on the wisdom & moderation of the restored dynasty. it is for them now to read a lesson in the fatal errors of the republicans; to be contented with a certain portion of power, secured by formal compact with the nation, rather than, grasping at more, hazard all upon uncertainty, and risk meeting the fate of their predecessor, or a renewal of their own exile. we are just informed too of an example which merits, if true, their most profound contemplation. the gazettes say that Ferdinand of Spain is dethroned, and his father reestablished on the basis of their new constitution. this order of magistrates must therefore see that altho'

the attempts at reformation have not succeeded in their whole length, and some recession from the ultimate point has taken place, yet that men have by no means fallen back to their former passiveness, but, on the contrary, that a sense of their rights, and a restlessness to obtain them, remain deeply impressed on every mind, and, if not quieted by reasonable relaxations of power, will break out like a volcano on the first occasion and overwhelm every thing again in it's way. I always thought the present king an honest and moderate man: and, having no issue, he is under a motive the less for yielding to personal considerations. I cannot therefore but hope that the patriots in and out of your legislature, acting in phalanx, but temperately and wisely, pressing unremittingly the principles omitted in the [late capitulation](#) of the king, and watching the occasions which the course of events will create, may get those principles engrafted into it, and sanctioned by the solemnity of a national act.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING 1: A Summary View of the Rights of British America, Thomas Jefferson | 1774

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/a-summary-view-of-the-rights-of-british-america-2/>

The Coercive Acts not only sparked outrage among the common people whom Gouverneur Morris (1752–1816) derided as members of the mob; they also inflamed the indignation of Americans who occupied positions of power and influence. One such person was Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), a member of Virginia’s House of Burgesses who helped write a May 1774 resolution designating a day of fasting and prayer to show solidarity with the people of Massachusetts. Soon after, Lord Dunmore (1730–1809), the royal governor, showed his solidarity with Parliament by dissolving the House of Burgesses. As the elected members of that body prepared to regroup as the extralegal Virginia Convention, Jefferson drafted for its consideration his Summary View of the Rights of British America.

The 31-year-old’s argument represented the next step in the progression of radical thought. While earlier critiques of British measures had denied the authority of Parliament to tax the colonies, Jefferson’s Summary View held that “the British Parliament has no right to exercise authority over us” in any circumstance. While earlier opponents of Britain’s policies had laid blame on Parliament, Jefferson’s argument elevated responsibility to the level of the king. “Let not the name of George the third be a blot in the page of history,” Jefferson wrote, reminding the monarch that “kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people.”

While stirring, Jefferson’s words struck many as too much, too soon. The Virginia Convention declined to adopt his statement as its own. Several of its members, however, arranged to have it published in Williamsburg as a pamphlet. Soon presses in Philadelphia and London printed their own editions of the Summary View, which, like most political pamphlets of the era, appeared without its author’s name on the title page. Even so, word spread of Jefferson’s role. In the summer of 1775 his reputation preceded his arrival as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, where Rhode Island representative Samuel Ward (1725–1776) recorded his first impression of “the famous Mr. Jefferson,” whom he sized up as “a very sensible, spirited, fine fellow—and by the pamphlet he wrote last summer, he certainly is one.”

—Robert M.S. McDonald

RESOLVED, that it be an instruction to the said deputies, when assembled in general congress with the deputies from the other states of British America, to propose to the said congress that a humble and dutiful address be presented to his majesty, begging leave to lay before him, as chief magistrate of the British empire, the united complaints of his majesty’s subjects in America; complaints which are excited by many unwarrantable encroachments and usurpations, attempted to be made by the legislature of one part of the empire, upon those rights which God and the laws have given equally and independently to all. To represent to his majesty that these his states have often individually made humble application to his imperial throne to obtain, through its intervention, some redress of their injured rights, to none of which was ever even an answer condescended; humbly to hope that this their joint address, penned in the language of truth, and divested of those expressions of servility which would persuade his majesty that we are asking favors, and not rights, shall obtain from his majesty a more respectful acceptance. And this his majesty will think we have reason to expect when he reflects that he is no more than the chief officer of the people, appointed by the laws, and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in working the great machine of government, erected for their use, and consequently subject

to their superintendence. And in order that these our rights, as well as the invasions of them, may be laid more fully before his majesty, to take a view of them from the origin and first settlement of these countries.

To remind him that our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.... Nor was ever any claim of superiority or dependence asserted over them by that mother country from which they had migrated; and were such a claim made, it is believed that his majesty's subjects in Great Britain have too firm a feeling of the rights derived to them from their ancestors, to bow down the sovereignty of their state before such visionary pretensions.....America was conquered, and her settlements made, and firmly established, at the expense of individuals, and not of the British public. Their own blood was spilt in acquiring lands for their settlement, their own fortunes expended in making that settlement effectual; for themselves they fought, for themselves they conquered, and for themselves alone they have right to hold. Not a shilling was ever issued from the public treasures of his majesty, or his ancestors, for their assistance, until of very late times, after the colonies had become established on a firm and permanent footing.... Settlements having been thus effected in the wilds of America, the emigrants thought proper to adopt that system of laws under which they had hitherto lived in the mother country, and to continue their union with her by submitting themselves to the same common sovereign, who was thereby made the central link connecting the several parts of the empire thus newly multiplied.

But that not long were they permitted, however far they thought themselves removed from the hand of oppression, to hold undisturbed the rights thus acquired, at the hazard of their lives, and loss of their fortunes. A family of princes was then on the British throne, whose treasonable crimes against their people brought on them afterwards the exertion of those sacred and sovereign rights of punishment reserved in the hands of the people for cases of extreme necessity, and judged by the constitution unsafe to be delegated to any other judicature. While every day brought forth some new and unjustifiable exertion of power over their subjects on that side the water, it was not to be expected that those here, much less able at that time to oppose the designs of despotism, should be exempted from injury.

Accordingly that country, which had been acquired by the lives, the labors, and the fortunes, of individual adventurers, was by these princes, at several times, parceled out and distributed among the favorites and ... by an assumed right of the crown alone, was erected into distinct and independent governments; a measure which it is believed his majesty's prudence and understanding would prevent him from imitating at this day, as no exercise of such a power, of dividing and dismembering a country, has ever occurred in his majesty's realm of England, though now of very ancient standing; nor could it be justified or acquiesced under there, or in any other part of his majesty's empire.

That the exercise of a free trade with all parts of the world, possessed by the American colonists, as of natural right, and which no law of their own had taken away or abridged, was next the object of unjust encroachment.... The Parliament for the commonwealth ... assumed upon themselves the power of prohibiting their trade with all other parts of the world, except the island of Great Britain. This arbitrary act, however, they soon recalled, and by solemn treaty, entered into on the 12th day of March, 1651, between the said commonwealth by their commissioners, and the colony of Virginia by their House of Burgesses, it was expressly stipulated, by the 8th

article of the said treaty, that they should have “free trade as the people of England do enjoy to all places and with all nations, according to the laws of that commonwealth.” But that, upon the restoration of his majesty King Charles the second, their rights of free commerce fell once more a victim to arbitrary power; and by several acts ... of his reign, as well as of some of his successors, the trade of the colonies was laid under such restrictions, as show what hopes they might form from the justice of a British Parliament, were its uncontrolled power admitted over these states. History has informed us that bodies of men, as well as individuals, are susceptible of the spirit of tyranny. A view of these acts of Parliament for regulation, as it has been affectedly called, of the American trade, if all other evidence were removed out of the case, would undeniably evince the truth of this observation.... That to heighten still the idea of parliamentary justice, and to show with what moderation they are like to exercise power, where themselves are to feel no part of its weight, we take leave to mention to his majesty certain other acts of British Parliament, by which they would prohibit us from manufacturing for our own use the articles we raise on our own lands with our own labor. By an act ... passed in the 5th year of the reign of his late majesty King George the second, an American subject is forbidden to make a hat for himself of the fur which he has taken perhaps on his own soil; an instance of despotism to which no parallel can be produced in the most arbitrary ages of British history. By one other act ... passed in the 23d year of the same reign, the iron which we make we are forbidden to manufacture, and heavy as that article is, and necessary in every branch of husbandry, besides commission and insurance, we are to pay freight for it to Great Britain, and freight for it back again, for the purpose of supporting not men, but machines, in the island of Great Britain.... But that we do not point out to his majesty the injustice of these acts, with intent to rest on that principle the cause of their nullity; but to show that experience confirms the propriety of those political principles which exempt us from the jurisdiction of the British Parliament. The true ground on which we declare these acts void is, that the British Parliament has no right to exercise authority over us....

That thus have we hastened through the reigns which preceded his majesty's, during which the violations of our right were less alarming, because repeated at more distant intervals than that rapid and bold succession of injuries which is likely to distinguish the present from all other periods of American story. Scarcely have our minds been able to emerge from the astonishment into which one stroke of parliamentary thunder has involved us, before another more heavy, and more alarming, is fallen on us. Single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day; but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period, and pursued unalterably through every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery....

[*One such*] act... passed in the same 7th year of his reign, having been a peculiar attempt, must ever require peculiar mention; it is entitled “An act for suspending the legislature of New York.” One free and independent legislature hereby takes upon itself to suspend the powers of another, free and independent as itself; thus exhibiting a phenomenon unknown in nature, the creator and creature of its own power. Not only the principles of common sense, but the common feelings of human nature, must be surrendered up before his majesty's subjects here can be persuaded to believe that they hold their political existence at the will of a British Parliament. Shall these governments be dissolved, their property annihilated, and their people reduced to a state of nature, at the imperious breath of a body of men, whom they never saw, in whom they never confided, and over whom they have no powers of punishment or removal, let their crimes against the American public be ever so great? Can any one reason be assigned why 160,000 electors in the island of Great Britain should give law to four millions in the states of America, every individual of whom is equal to every individual of them,

in virtue, in understanding, and in bodily strength? Were this to be admitted, instead of being a free people, as we have hitherto supposed, and mean to continue ourselves, we should suddenly be found the slaves, not of one, but of 160,000 tyrants, distinguished too from all others by this singular circumstance, that they are removed from the reach of fear, the only restraining motive which may hold the hand of a tyrant.

That by “an act ... to discontinue in such manner and for such time as are therein mentioned the landing and discharging, lading or shipping, of goods, wares, and merchandize, at the town and within the harbor of Boston, in the province of Massachusetts Bay, in North America,” which was passed at the last session of British Parliament; a large and populous town, whose trade was their sole subsistence, was deprived of that trade, and involved in utter ruin. Let us for a while suppose the question of right suspended, in order to examine this act on principles of justice: An act of Parliament had been passed imposing duties on teas, to be paid in America, against which act the Americans had protested as inauthoritative. The East India Company, who until that time had never sent a pound of tea to America on their own account, step forth on that occasion the asserters of parliamentary right, and send hither many shiploads of that obnoxious commodity. The masters of their several vessels, however, on their arrival in America, wisely attended to admonition, and returned with their cargoes. In the province of Massachusetts alone the remonstrances of the people were disregarded, and a compliance, after being many days waited for, was flatly refused. Whether in this the master of the vessel was governed by his obstinacy, or his instructions, let those who know, say. There are extraordinary situations which require extraordinary interposition. An exasperated people, who feel that they possess power, are not easily restrained within limits strictly regular. A number of them assembled in the town of Boston, threw the tea into the ocean, and dispersed without doing any other act of violence. If in this they did wrong, they were known and were amenable to the laws of the land, against which it could not be objected that they had ever, in any instance, been obstructed or diverted from their regular course in favor of popular offenders. They should therefore not have been distrusted on this occasion. But that ill fated colony had formerly been bold in their enmities against the house of Stuart, and were now devoted to ruin by that unseen hand which governs the momentous affairs of this great empire. On the partial representations of a few worthless ministerial dependents, whose constant office it has been to keep that government embroiled, and who, by their treacheries, hope to obtain the dignity of the British knighthood, without calling for a party accused, without asking a proof, without attempting a distinction between the guilty and the innocent, the whole of that ancient and wealthy town is in a moment reduced from opulence to beggary. Men who had spent their lives in extending the British commerce, who had invested in that place the wealth their honest endeavors had merited, found themselves and their families thrown at once on the world for subsistence by its charities. Not the hundredth part of the inhabitants of that town had been concerned in the act complained of; many of them were in Great Britain and in other parts beyond sea; yet all were involved in one indiscriminate ruin, by a new executive power, unheard of until then, that of a British Parliament. A property, of the value of many millions of money, was sacrificed to revenge, not repay, the loss of a few thousands. This is administering justice with a heavy hand indeed!...

By the act ... for the suppression of riots and tumults in the town of Boston, passed also in the last session of Parliament, a murder committed there is, if the governor pleases, to be tried in the court of King’s Bench, in the island of Great Britain, by a jury of Middlesex. The witnesses, too, on receipt of such a sum as the governor shall think it reasonable for them to expend, are to enter into recognizance to appear at the trial. This is, in other words, taxing them to the amount of their recognizance, and that amount may be whatever a governor pleases; for who does his majesty think can be prevailed on to cross the Atlantic for the sole purpose of bearing evidence

to a fact? His expenses are to be borne, indeed, as they shall be estimated by a governor; but who are to feed the wife and children whom he leaves behind, and who have had no other subsistence but his daily labor?... And the wretched criminal, if he happen to have offended on the American side, stripped of his privilege of trial by peers of his vicinage, removed from the place where alone full evidence could be obtained, without money, without counsel, without friends, without exculpatory proof, is tried before judges predetermined to condemn. The cowards who would suffer a countryman to be torn from the bowels of their society, in order to be thus offered a sacrifice to parliamentary tyranny, would merit that everlasting infamy now fixed on the authors of the act!... That these are the acts of power, assumed by a body of men, foreign to our constitutions, and unacknowledged by our laws, against which we do, on behalf of the inhabitants of British America, enter this our solemn and determined protest; and we do earnestly entreat his majesty, as yet the only mediatory power between the several states of the British empire, to recommend to his Parliament of Great Britain the total revocation of these acts, which, however nugatory they be, may yet prove the cause of further discontents and jealousies among us.

That we next proceed to consider the conduct of his majesty, as holding the executive powers of the laws of these states, and mark out his deviations from the line of duty: By the constitution of Great Britain, as well as of the several American states, his majesty possesses the power of refusing to pass into a law any bill which has already passed the other two branches of legislature. His majesty, however, and his ancestors, conscious of the impropriety of opposing their single opinion to the united wisdom of two houses of Parliament, while their proceedings were unbiased by interested principles, for several ages past have modestly declined the exercise of this power in that part of his empire called Great Britain. But by change of circumstances, other principles than those of justice simply have obtained an influence on their determinations; the addition of new states to the British empire has produced an addition of new, and sometimes opposite interests. It is now, therefore, the great office of his majesty, to resume the exercise of his negative power, and to prevent the passage of laws by any one legislature of the empire, which might bear injuriously on the rights and interests of another. Yet this will not excuse the wanton exercise of this power, which we have seen his majesty practice on the laws of the American legislatures. For the most trifling reasons, and sometimes for no conceivable reason at all, his majesty has rejected laws of the most salutary tendency. The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty's negative: Thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few British corsairs^[4] to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous practice. Nay, the single interposition of an interested individual against a law was scarcely ever known to fail of success, although in the opposite scale were placed the interests of a whole country. That this is so shameful an abuse of a power trusted with his majesty for other purposes, as if not reformed, would call for some legal restrictions....

Since the establishment ... of the British constitution, at the glorious revolution, on its free and ancient principles, neither his majesty, nor his ancestors, have exercised such a power of dissolution [of Parliament] in the island of Great Britain; and when his majesty was petitioned, by the united voice of his people there, to dissolve the present Parliament, who had become obnoxious to them, his ministers were heard to declare, in open Parliament, that his majesty possessed no such power by the constitution. But how different their

language and his practice here! To declare, as their duty required, the known rights of their country, to oppose the usurpations of every foreign judicature, to disregard the imperious mandates of a minister or governor, have been the avowed causes of dissolving houses of representatives in America. But if such powers be really vested in his majesty, can he suppose they are there placed to awe the members from such purposes as these? When the representative body have lost the confidence of their constituents, when they have notoriously made sale of their most valuable rights, when they have assumed to themselves powers which the people never put into their hands, then indeed their continuing in office becomes dangerous to the state, and calls for an exercise of the power of dissolution. Such being the causes for which the representative body should, and should not, be dissolved, will it not appear strange to an unbiased observer, that that of Great Britain was not dissolved, while those of the colonies have repeatedly incurred that sentence?...

That in order to enforce the arbitrary measures before complained of, his majesty has from time to time sent among us large bodies of armed forces, not made up of the people here, nor raised by the authority of our laws: Did his majesty possess such a right as this, it might swallow up all our other rights whenever he should think proper. But his majesty has no right to land a single armed man on our shores, and those whom he sends here are liable to our laws made for the suppression and punishment of riots, routs, and unlawful assemblies; or are hostile bodies, invading us in defiance of law. When in the course of the late war it became expedient that a body of Hanoverian troops should be brought over for the defense of Great Britain, his majesty's grandfather, our late sovereign, did not pretend to introduce them under any authority he possessed. Such a measure would have given just alarm to his subjects in Great Britain, whose liberties would not be safe if armed men of another country, and of another spirit, might be brought into the realm at any time without the consent of their legislature. He therefore applied to Parliament, who passed an act for that purpose, limiting the number to be brought in and the time they were to continue. In like manner is his majesty restrained in every part of the empire. He possesses, indeed, the executive power of the laws in every state; but they are the laws of the particular state which he is to administer within that state, and not those of any one within the limits of another. Every state must judge for itself the number of armed men which they may safely trust among them, of whom they are to consist, and under what restrictions they shall be laid.

To render these proceedings still more criminal against our laws, instead of subjecting the military to the civil powers, his majesty has expressly made the civil subordinate to the military. But can his majesty thus put down all law under his feet? Can he erect a power superior to that which erected himself? He has done it indeed by force; but let him remember that force cannot give right.

That these are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights, as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate: Let those flatter who fear; it is not an American art. To give praise which is not due might be well from the venal, but would ill beseem those who are asserting the rights of human nature. They know, and will therefore say, that kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people. Open your breast, sire, to liberal and expanded thought. Let not the name of George the third be a blot in the page of history. You are surrounded by British counselors, but remember that they are parties. You have no ministers for American affairs, because you have none taken from among us, nor amenable to the laws on which they are to give you advice. It behooves you, therefore, to think and to act for yourself and your people. The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader; to pursue them requires not the aid of many

counselors. The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty, and mankind will give you credit where you fail. No longer persevere in sacrificing the rights of one part of the empire to the inordinate desires of another; but deal out to all equal and impartial right. Let no act be passed by any one legislature which may infringe on the rights and liberties of another. This is the important post in which fortune has placed you, holding the balance of a great, if a well-poised empire. This, sire, is the advice of your great American council, on the observance of which may perhaps depend your felicity and future fame, and the preservation of that harmony which alone can continue both to Great Britain and America the reciprocal advantages of their connection. It is neither our wish, nor our interest, to separate from her. We are willing, on our part, to sacrifice every thing which reason can ask to the restoration of that tranquility for which all must wish. On their part, let them be ready to establish union on a generous plan. Let them name their terms, but let them be just.... The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them. This, sire, is our last, our determined resolution; and that you will be pleased to interpose with that efficacy which your earnest endeavors may ensure to procure redress of these our great grievances, to quiet the minds of your subjects in British America, against any apprehensions of future encroachment, to establish fraternal love and harmony through the whole empire, and that these may continue to the latest ages of time, is the fervent prayer of all British America!