

US HISTORY

American Revolution as a Social Revolution?

***Directions** – Read the *Declaration of Independence* below. Then choose a historical perspective of either (1) an American woman, (2) a slave in the South, (3) a poor farmer and Revolutionary War veteran, (4) a wealthy merchant from the North. You will write a short letter to the Continental Congress from your historical perspective that describes what you hope our Revolution has achieved, and what you think the new American society and government should look like. As you write your letter, be sure to consider and discuss some of the biases and desires of your historical perspective.

The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

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 unalienable 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 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, 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.

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 injury. 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.

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 jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

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 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.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Carefully read all of the following perspectives so that you have an understanding of what fears, desires, and biases existed throughout the newly formed American society.

***Revolutionary Woman** – You are a woman who supported the American Revolutionary cause through assisting in the success of boycotts against British goods and through providing resources for the Continental Army. You know that patriotic women throughout America did much to support the success of the Revolution and through many roles – some were traditional, while others were unconventional and scandalous for the time. From supportive roles like nurses, cooks, and maids to more direct roles such as secret soldiers and spies, women did more than their share to help win American independence. Now you hope that the new American society and government will grant you many of the same rights that will be granted to men. You see the creation of America as an opportunity to create a progressive society that embraces the talents of women and offers greater roles in government and society than has been seen in any other place in history. You therefore hope that women will be granted legal equality, will have the opportunity to vote in elections, and will have an opportunity to serve in local and state governments.

Historical Support:

"I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

-Abigail Adams, to her husband John Adams

***Southern Plantation Slave** – You are a literate slave who has been paying close attention to the events that have transpired in this revolution. You have heard the arguments made in the Declaration of Independence, and you have heard that in response many slave owners have begun manumitting (freeing) their slaves, and that many northern states have begun outlawing slavery. You are also aware that the British Redcoats freed slaves who were owned by American rebels, and in response General George Washington has begun to offer freedom and pay to all slaves who served in the Continental Army. News has spread to your plantation to indicate that American politicians are debating whether or not to outlaw the slave trade. You are hoping that the new American society will be free of the chains of slavery, and that you will be offered equal status in the government and society.

Historical Support:

"Liberty is equally as precious to a black man, as it is to a white one, and bondage as equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other."

-Lemuel Haynes, African-American poet, preacher, and soldier

*"Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate*

*Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

-Phillis Wheatley, a slave and poet, writing to the Earl of Dartmouth, an influential British policy maker

***Poor White Farmer and Revolutionary War Veteran** – You fought for the success of American independence. You have sacrificed for your country, and did so for nearly no pay and under terrible conditions. You believe that you have earned a special status in the new American society and government. You believe that people are basically good, thus capable of self-government – not through a big federal government. You favor a natural aristocracy, based on talent and virtue. You believe that there should be widespread access to both education and property. You believe that all white males should have a right to vote in elections and should be able to participate in the government through being elected to public positions. You believe that all white males should be viewed equally in politics and society.

Historical Support:

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories."

-Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence

***Wealthy Businessman/Merchant from the North** – You feel you have a privileged position in the new American society, and you should have a greater role in the creation and administration of the government. You believe that people are basically selfish, and thus a strong government is needed to restrain people's selfish actions. You believe in a rich and well-born aristocracy, based upon birth, wealth, and status. You believe that women and poor whites do not do enough to support society, and therefore should not be involved in the government, nor should you be allowed to vote in elections. You believe that as a wealthy person whose work drives the economy and success of the new nation, you have more at stake and should be given greater responsibility in this new government and society.

Historical Support:

"Those who own the country ought to govern it."

-John Jay, Founding Father and Diplomat