

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# The Declaration

## Primary Source Reading

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The Second Continental Congress selected Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was a statesman from Virginia who was known as an idealist and a good writer. Jefferson locked himself in a room for a few days, writing on a special desk he had designed. His draft stated forcefully that governments don't grant rights; people are born, or endowed, with unalienable rights that they are entitled to, and the government should protect those rights. Those rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, the government gets its power and legitimacy from the will of the people, not from God, tradition or military power.

Notes

These ideas come directly from the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement with origins in Europe in the seventeenth century. Thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed the revolutionary ideas that men were born with rights and that governments rested on the will of the people. Jefferson was heavily inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment.

2. The Declaration states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." The United States is the first government in the world to be founded on this amazing idea. Of course, it didn't seem to apply to the 500,000 slaves in America, to women or to Native Americans, all of whom still struggled for equal rights for years after the Declaration was written. Still, it represented a leap forward in political and moral thought.

Notes

3. What else does the Declaration declare? It states that sometimes, “it’s necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,” which was Jefferson’s polite way of saying that America was done with King George. The Declaration goes on to list “grievances” (all the things King George had done wrong) that impelled, or forced, them to declare their independence from England. It accuses King George of “cutting off [our] trade” and “imposing taxes on us without our consent.” In all, it lists 27 things that King George did wrong. The Declaration ends by actually naming the new country: “We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America...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.”

Notes

4. Though a slaveholder himself, Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence blamed King George for the slave trade, which Jefferson called “execrable commerce.” Execrable means extremely bad. The delegates quickly deleted this passage, not only because most of them supported slavery, but also because blaming the slave trade on King George was totally false. Why Jefferson would criticize a system he supported (and that supported him) is unclear. It’s typically written off as simple hypocrisy.

Notes