



Big Idea 8

After the Declaration: What Happens Next?

Independence may have been approved in the summer of 1776, but the ramifications of the Declaration would extend far into the future. The authors had created something that had unintended audiences, and unintended consequences that would be felt during the Revolutionary Era and beyond. The immediate goals — a greater sense of unity among Revolutionaries and the acquisition of foreign allies — were met, but new goals have since been attached to the Declaration of Independence. Whether these have been met is a question for us all to discuss and debate in the present.

Independence and Rebuttals

When word of the decision on independence spread, **Revolutionaries** celebrated it while Loyalists considered it an act of betrayal. Others simply hoped that they would escape the war without loss or suffering. Regardless of what **political** position they held, they all felt the impact of the new goal of independence in some way.

For Revolutionaries, independence was a possibility that many had not expected or even considered as recently as a year before. Protests to alter British policy had turned into full-blown rebellion. Some Revolutionaries were uneasy about this significant change. Imagine what it must have felt like to join a movement with one goal, only to watch it change into a different, more drastic one. Others embraced the idea of independence and began to find common ground with fellow Revolutionaries that they did not think they had. The Declaration of Independence had helped them see how British policy had impacted colonists throughout North America. Now many felt they were no longer just thirteen separate colonies protesting, they were self-governing states united behind a worthy cause.

Loyalists, however, were distressed over how far Revolutionaries had gone. They wanted to remain part of the British Empire for all the benefits it offered, political or moral stances they held, or a variety of other reasons. Many of them felt that the Continental Congress' actions were illegal and did not represent the views of most American colonists.

As the Declaration spread throughout the states, people began to analyze its words. Some chose to publish their disagreements, citing what they considered to be lies and falsehoods in the document and disputing its logic. Former Governor of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson penned a rebuttal to the Declaration entitled *Strictures Upon the Declaration of the Congress at Philadelphia*. In it he accused the Continental Congress of **hypocrisy** for suggesting that man's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was **inalienable** while allowing so many enslaved people to be deprived of those same rights. He also disputed many of the **grievances** laid out in the Declaration, attempting to logically disprove them. Meanwhile, 547 Loyalists in New York signed a *Declaration of Dependence*, affirming their loyalty to the British Empire. The signers included farmers, merchants, and free people of African descent. These everyday people had many things in common with those celebrating independence, but they wanted no part of it themselves.

A Treaty of Alliance

Responses to the Declaration came from overseas as well, and no international response was as important to the Continental Congress as that of potential allies and world powers France and Spain. The Declaration made the case that the British **Monarchy** had given up its right to rule the American colonies based on King George III's failures. Congress hoped this would convince other monarchies to assist the newly independent states without encouraging similar rebellions in their own countries.

A Treaty of Alliance had been drafted at the same time as the Declaration. It was to be sent to France in the event that independence was declared, and members of Congress wasted little time in following through on this. On Monday, July 8, the Continental Navy brig *Dispatch* was tasked with carrying a copy of the Declaration to France. Further instructions were included that it should be shared with the other Courts of Europe. Kings Louis XVI and Carlos III were sympathetic to Americans but had to carefully weigh the risks to their own interests. Defeating Britain would be a prestigious victory after their own defeats in the French and Indian War and would reduce Britain's power over the rest of the world, but war was expensive and dangerous. Ultimately, they both chose to go to war with Britain.

Other nations formed a League of Armed Neutrality to contest Britain's control of the sea and to protect neutral shipping. While only France entered a formal alliance with the United States, Britain still found itself fighting a global war against many European nations.

Unintended Audiences

The Declaration of Independence served its immediate political and military goals, but it did something else as well: it provided a clear rationale, directly from some of the leading men of the new states, for people who had been denied access to natural rights in the colonies to demand those rights. These arguments weren't new when they were presented in the Declaration, and in fact, many educated people found them to be unremarkable by 1776. But the Declaration's authors weren't in agreement over whether, how, or when those arguments should apply to people in social classes beyond their own. For the people demanding rights, however, the answer was often "yes, to us, and as soon as possible."

- **Women** like Abigail Adams understood the phrase "all men are created equal" to be about all of mankind, men and women alike. Many laws existed that restricted their rights compared to men. These laws were even more restrictive when women were married. Abigail frequently wrote to her husband John Adams in the Continental Congress as he debated independence and helped edit the Declaration. She implored him to "remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." She hoped that he could prevent the new nation from putting "unlimited power into the hands of the husbands" and argued that without restraints, "all men would be tyrants if they could."
- **People of African descent**, both free and enslaved, found hope in the words of the Declaration. Slavery's presence throughout the colonies deprived most people of African descent of their freedoms. Those fortunate enough to not be enslaved often still had fewer rights than other free people due to their race. James Forten was born into freedom, but empathized with those who were enslaved. The words of the Declaration made him hope the new states would be places where they could be free, and he served on a privateer ship for the Revolutionaries in the hopes that this would become a reality. Still, for many others living in slavery, the Declaration was viewed with suspicion. How could it have equality and liberty as two of its core principles while so many were still enslaved in the United States?

- **Laboring men** who had historically been excluded from voting also found meaning in the Declaration's words. Though they enjoyed more rights than many others in the Empire, they generally could not vote if they didn't own property worth a certain value. The Declaration suggested that poor men and wealthy ones had the same natural rights; for laboring men who did not own land or much money, this provided hope that they might soon have the same political say as men who did. Perhaps other opportunities, like the ability to serve in office, would open up as well.
- **People who were not Protestant** were excited by the possibility of religious freedom that the Declaration contained. The Church of England, or the Anglican church, had been the preferred religious structure within the British Empire. However, the promises of equality and liberty within the Declaration suggested to Jewish, Catholic, and other believers that they might receive better treatment in this new social and political environment.

Imagine that you had heard the words of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Would you have found hope in it, too, or would you have been afraid that nothing would change?

Life After Independence

After the war, life did change, in big ways and in small ones, for many of the people mentioned above. For example, as the new states wrote their own constitutions — a necessary step now that they had renounced British authority — most reduced the barriers to voting for free, white men. They were now able to have a greater voice in how their communities were run.

In New Jersey, women and free people of African descent were also able to vote for over 30 years, though they, like white men in their state, did need to own a certain amount of property to do so. However, the New Jersey state legislature took this ability away in 1807, expressing concerns about voter fraud, voter suppression. Discomfort around this major social and political changes was likely also to blame. Yet New Jersey was also one of the many northern states to pass gradual abolition acts, which slowly outlawed slavery in those states. In the south, however, slavery remained, and grew. Meanwhile, women were given more responsibility as the first educators of the new nation's future leaders. Some women used this educational opportunity to prepare themselves and other women and girls for leadership roles as well.

For Native peoples, like others, the outcomes of the war were complicated. Nations that had sided with the British suffered devastating losses in backcountry fighting during the war and lost much of their land closest to the independent states in the war's aftermath. However, many did participate in diplomatic relationships with the new United States of America, hoping to do the best they could to regain power or survive. Joseph Brant, of the Mohawk people, for example, served as a diplomat and negotiator. Allies of the United States, such as the Oneida, fared better in the short term, but as the new nation grew, they too, saw their lands dwindle as they were pushed further north and west. However, they had been proud to stand together with the Revolutionaries in what they believed had been a noble fight.

Religious minorities perhaps fared better. Some states, including Maryland, wrote their state constitutions to eliminate official religions, or like Pennsylvania, simply used their constitutions to make longstanding practice in this area official. Steps like these meant that people who were not Anglican, or broadly Protestant, were no longer taxed to support a religion that they did not practice. Rabbi Gershom Seixas, of Newport, Rhode Island, expressed to President George Washington over a decade after these early state constitutions were written, his hope that this state of affairs would continue to grow and improve in practice as well as on paper. Echoing

Rabbi Seixas's own words back to him, Washington replied "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens." These were aspirational words in 1790. Do you think they are today as well?

An Ongoing Revolution

The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was in many ways a war document. It was a political message to Revolutionaries in the British North American colonies and their potential allies in European nations. But it somewhat unexpectedly also became the center of various rallying cries for equality and liberty from its earliest moments, and it has continued to do so to this day.

The women's suffrage and women's rights movements have leaned on the Declaration to support their demands for equality under the law. For example, the attendees of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 produced a *Declaration of Sentiments* that was modeled after, and used similar language to, the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. The abolitionist and anti-slavery movements also frequently referenced the words of the Declaration, as did later activists within the Civil Rights Movement.

Yet some have seen the equality statement within the Declaration as less important than the idea of personal liberty or of personal property, allowing the same document to be used by people on different sides of the same issue to try to achieve their own goals. While abolitionists used the Declaration as a tool against slavery, the Confederacy during the Civil War used the Declaration's justification of breaking away to form a new government as a rationale for doing the same. Some, like Mississippi, even published their own rationales for secession, modeled after the Declaration.

The Declaration of Independence has even served as a model for independence and equality movements outside of the United States. Places as distant in geography and time as Vermont (1777), Flanders (1790), Haiti (1804), Argentina (1816), Liberia (1847), Vietnam (1945), and Bangladesh (1971) have issued independence documents that have echoed the themes, structure, and sometimes pieces of its exact language. Not all these movements have been successful or long-lasting. However, they demonstrate the power of the ideals of the Revolutionary movement and of the example of the United States of America, even as Americans have continued to wrestle with what those ideals mean in practice.

What do you believe the ideals of the Declaration of Independence mean, or should, today?