

The Declaration's Ideas

Jefferson's key ideas broke from the past. According to Jefferson, the purpose of government was not to serve the rulers. It was to serve the people and uphold their rights. Where did Jefferson get these ideas?

Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment. This was a period during the 17th and 18th centuries. Thinkers turned to reason and science to explain the world. They thought that people could improve their lives by learning about the "laws of nature."

Jefferson did not invent the ideas that he used in the declaration. He said that he had adopted the views of the day. These ideas were, so to speak, "in the air."

Jefferson knew British history. He also knew British political thought. He had read the statements of independence by other colonies. He knew well the writings of Americans like Thomas Paine and George Mason. In writing the declaration, Jefferson followed the format of the English Declaration of Rights. This was written after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which had driven King James II off the English throne.

Jefferson modeled the most famous ideas in the Declaration of Independence on those of John Locke. Locke was an English writer. He wrote his book *Second Treatise of Government* in 1689, right after the Glorious Revolution. Locke's book explained why overthrowing a king could be the right thing to do.

Locke believed that long ago, before there were any governments, people lived in a state of nature. Even in the state of nature, people had rights. Locke wrote that all men are equal. They are born with natural rights that are "unalienable." Among these natural rights, Locke said, are "life, liberty, and property."

According to Locke, the state of nature could be dangerous. People might kill one another. They might steal from each other. So, people formed governments to protect their natural rights.

Locke wrote that the government and the people have a contract. The government must guard people's natural rights. In turn, the people must obey the law. But, Locke said, the government might break the contract with "a long train of abuses." If a government wrongs its people with those abuses, the people have the right to resist that government. They can change it. They can even get rid of it and create a new one.

Locke believed that life itself is a natural right. He said that people have both a right and a duty to save their own lives. Killers, however, lose their right to life since they don't respect the life of others.

Liberty was another natural right. Locke said that people should be free to decide how to live. But they must not hinder the liberty of others. Locke strongly believed in freedom.

By "property," another natural right, Locke meant more than owning things. He also meant owning oneself. This included a right to personal well being. He sometimes said people had a right to the "pursuit of happiness," too.

Jefferson adopted Locke's ideas. In the declaration, he spoke first about natural rights. He then went on to explain why the revolution was necessary in 1776. He next listed all the ways that King George had abused the colonists' rights. On that list, he accused the king of taxing the colonists without their consent. He accused the king of taking away the right of jury trials. In general, he said the laws were whatever the king wanted, and the colonists had no say in the matter.

How Could Jefferson Say That "All Men Are Created Equal"?

The Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal." This meant that everyone had the same God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But how could Jefferson and the other signers believe this? After all, slavery existed in the colonies. Many slave owners argued that slaves were not equal. But Jefferson, also a slave owner, did not agree.

From an early age, Jefferson hated slavery. But he saw no way to end it. If the slaves were freed all at once, Jefferson feared a bloody war. But if slaves were freed one by one, he worried they would have no way to survive.

Of course, Jefferson and other Southern plantation owners depended on slave labor. A plantation is a large farm. Plantations were key to the Southern economy.

Jefferson came up with a plan. He wrote that slave children should be taken from their parents and put in schools. There they would learn a trade. When they grew up, they would be moved to a colony somewhere. There they would be given tools and work animals to start a new life. They would be "free and independent people."

His plan never gained much support. Slavery in the United States lasted until 1865, when the Civil War ended. But even then, the equality promised in the Declaration of Independence was denied to black people, women, and others. It would take another 100 years for the United States to get close to the ideals in the declaration.

The Declaration of Independence is not law in the United States. It is not part of the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights. But its words state America's ideals. In the 19th century, abolitionists embraced the ideal of equality and worked to end slavery. The women's rights movement embraced the ideal, too. Women added "all men *and women* are created equal" to a famous declaration of rights in 1848. The civil rights movement of the 20th century urged America to honor the ideals of the declaration. The document still speaks to us today as it did in 1776.

For Discussion and Writing

1. John Locke influenced Jefferson's writing. Explain Locke's idea about the contract between government and the people.
2. What do you think slaves would have thought about the phrase "all men are created equal"?
3. Do you see any differences between what people today believe and what they do? What are those differences? Why do you think they exist?