

Jefferson's Declaration
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by Lewis E. Lehrman

Thomas Jefferson was a student of the classics, science, and history. The Virginia planter and lawyer was a scholar, a thinker, a writer -- but he was no speaker. He was the man to whom colleagues went when they needed an eloquent pen and a brain that understood the best political scholarship of the time.

Appointed to the Continental Congress in 1775, Jefferson attended meetings that spring and autumn. During a summer visit home, a daughter died in childbirth. In December 1775, Jefferson returned to his beloved Monticello and his beloved wife, Martha.

Despite the press of congressional business, Jefferson remained at home during early 1776. Martha's health remained fragile. His mother would die in March. Jefferson himself suffered from the debilitating headaches, an affliction of a lifetime. Only in May of 1776 did the 33-year-old Jefferson return to Philadelphia. There, he took up residence in two rooms on Market Street, using one room for sleeping and the other for writing.

On June 11, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to prepare a Declaration of Independence. "The committee were John Adams, Dr. Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, and myself. Committees were also appointed, at the same time, to prepare a plan of confederation for the colonies, and to state the terms proper to be proposed for foreign alliance," recalled Jefferson.

Massachusetts delegate Adams pushed for Jefferson to head the drafting effort: "Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation, not even Samuel Adams was more so, that he soon seized upon my heart; and upon this occasion I gave him my vote and did all in my power to procure the votes of others. I think he had one more vote than any other, and that placed him at the head of the committee."¹

Jefferson had prepared himself for the task at hand -- "From his voracious reading, from his extensive knowledge of law, from his acute attention to the views of his teachers and of his colleagues in politics, and from his instinctive understanding of independence as he had personally experienced it on his borderland plantations."² "Jefferson said the purpose of the document was not to find out new principles or new arguments never before thought of, not merely to say things that had never been said before, but as Jefferson said, 'to place before mankind the common sense of the subject,'"³

Jefferson wrote and rewrote the document until both he and fellow committee members

¹ (Letter from John Adams to Timothy Pickering, August 6, 1822).

² Bernard Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew*, p. 43.

³ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Cleopatra's Nose: Essays on the Unexpected*, p. 174.

were satisfied with the draft -- much of which was a laundry list of American complaints against the British government. “The committee for drawing the Declaration of Independence, desired me to do it,” recalled Jefferson. “It was accordingly done, and being approved by them, I reported it to the House on Friday, the 28th of June, when it was read, and ordered to lie on the table.”⁴

Jefferson’s extensive reading was important because he “saw his assignment as setting down as clearly as possible the opinions commonly held by Americans and their Congress.”⁵ Jefferson himself recalled: “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, etc.”⁶

Jefferson claimed not to have consulted any particular source as he wrote, but the truth is he managed to incorporate the ideas of several prominent contemporaries.

Jefferson’s assignment was simple: justify independence -- by all means available -- as quickly as he could compile those justifications into one document. The terse justification of his work came in the opening sentence: “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.”

The intellectual heart of the Declaration, however, can be found in the second paragraph: “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.” This paragraph is the very one which Mr. Lincoln mobilized in his successful campaign against slavery from 1854 until the day of his death in 1865.

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⁴ (Thomas Jefferson, Autobiography, January 6, 1821).

⁵ A.J. Langguth, *Patriots: The Men who Started the American Revolution*, p. 314.

⁶ (Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825).