

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE'S INFLUENCE AROUND THE WORLD

by Dr. David Armitage

The Declaration of Independence didn't just launch the United States, it also became a model for people around the world fighting for freedom and self-government. In this essay, historian David Armitage explains how the Declaration worked both as America's "birth certificate" and as an international announcement meant to win allies. You'll explore how it was understood in 1776, how other countries reacted, and how its ideas have inspired movements from Haiti to Vietnam.

Use the questions below to guide your reading and help you connect the Declaration's meaning at home and abroad.

Origins and Meaning in 1776

1. What events and needs prompted the writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776?
2. Armitage describes the "two-fold significance" of the Declaration of Independence. Identify both aspects and support each with historical details.
3. The essay calls the Declaration "Janus-faced." Based on context, what does this mean, and how does it connect to its two-fold significance?
4. Armitage says the Declaration was "at once traditional and avant-garde" in 1776. In what ways was it both?
5. What principles in the Declaration of Independence are universal?

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Early International Reception

1. How was the Declaration received internationally at the time? Give one specific example.
2. How did other countries react to the Declaration of Independence when it was written?

Global Legacy & Later Influence

1. Compare how Americans interpret the Declaration with how it is interpreted around the world.
2. Give an example of a later declaration of independence from each of these regions: Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.
3. What common factors have prompted declarations of independence around the world?

Reflect and Discuss

Do you agree with Lajos Kossuth's statement that the U.S. Declaration of Independence was "the noblest, happiest page in mankind's history"? Share insight into your response.