

## Enlightenment Ideas Reflected in the Declaration of Independence

While a significant historical life-changing artifact, the Declaration of Independence had never been perceived as a sample of innovative philosophical thought. The Declaration was drafted mainly by Thomas Jefferson, with only some adjustments made by Congressmen. The document was a product of an already established school of thought called the Enlightenment. This European intellectual movement stood up against absolutist rulers and exploitation and promoted the power of reason, tolerance, and equality. Thomas Jefferson, an educated thinker, studied the Enlightenment ideas meticulously, as reflected in the Declaration of Independence text.

One of the essential values the Declaration asserts is equality, as "all men are created equal". It was a product of the ideas of the Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes championed the natural rights theory that presumed all humans were created equal by a force of nature or God. It meant such rights as the right to life or property were intrinsically human and therefore did not require a sovereign king to give authorization. Although already quite common, this concept was a strong argument for further ideas and requirements stated in the Declaration. Hobbes had also worked on the concept of a social contract, a significant cornerstone of the document.

Many Enlightenment philosophers explored the relations between the society, its members, and the state power as presented by a sovereign, king, or government. Hobbes saw the agreement regulating those relations as something liquidating any rights of the people to oppose the ruler as soon as that social contract becomes enacted. John Locke, another prominent thinker of that era, argued for a far more assertive role of a social contract. In his opinion, the people, as allowed by nature itself, decide if the sovereign is allowed to continue with his ruling. A sovereign is one only for the people who entrusted that to him. In this approach, the very notion of state power is strongly downsized to the level of the majority of the population, which promotes the maintenance of the balance of powers. Locke's views were presented in the Declaration in the elegant formula "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed".

The concept of a social contract was extensively developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau into a more robust theory. Not only he believed in an equal standing of the parties of such agreement, being a sovereign and the people. But he also introduced a concept of general will - a vision of good for all the people - that should prevail over individual wishes to ensure well-being for all. Along with the other Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau's theory gave Jefferson a solid argument for the primary purpose of the Declaration of Independence. It provided that "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it". Thus, when the actions of a sovereign do not align with the general will, he should have been replaced or a power hierarchy altered.

The Age of Enlightenment had the human ability and privilege to reason at its core. Its slightly idealistic perception romanticized the fight against absolutism and inequality. The great Enlightenment thinkers formulated sensible arguments to support those aspirations. Thomas Jefferson, a well-educated man of his time, got significant inspiration and foundation for the Declaration of Independence from Enlightenment works. It all helped shape the document in a persuasive manner but also as codified principles of the nation and state.