

The Declaration of Independence in a Global Context

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects: U.S. History, Civics, Government

Time Required: One 75-minute class period

Historical Thinking Skills: Primary Source Analysis, Comparison

Objective: Students will contrast the American Declaration of Independence with the French Declaration of the Rights of Man to analyze how historical context and differing political and religious values shaped differences between the two.

Materials: Excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man (attached)

Background:

This lesson explores how America's key foundational document, the Declaration of Independence, laid the foundation for France's Declaration of the Rights of Man. Both societies were in a state of revolutionary upheaval and confronting what they considered to be tyrannical monarchies. Both felt they were dealing with unjust oppression and were justifying their right to resist. However, crucial differences emerged. Through exploration and analysis, students can grasp the universality and radical nature of the American Declaration compared to the French one. They can also see and understand how it (Declaration of Independence) would eventually have a global appeal across racial and ethnic lines.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm Up Activity (5-10 minutes)

Ask students the following questions as a bell-ringer activity:

- 1) When is rebellion justified?
- 2) Why would people starting a revolution feel compelled to justify it?



Have students independently write their own responses. Allow time to discuss in small groups or as a class. Briefly introduce how the Americans and the French handled these questions in different historical contexts.

Part 2: Set the Stage (25 minutes)

Give a short presentation providing an overview of key historical context:

- Historical Context - American Founding
 - The American Revolution (1775-1783) was a response to British colonial policies that the American colonists deemed oppressive, including taxation without representation and violations of individual rights.
 - Colonists considered themselves possessive of English liberties (e.g. Magna Carta, English Bill of Rights, etc.). They were familiar with John Locke's compact theory of government and the political writings of other English and French Enlightenment thinkers.
 - The American colonists were, overall, deeply religious. New England Puritans and Pilgrims had come seeking religious freedom. In their minds, political and religious liberties were inseparable.
 - The American colonists hoped for assistance from foreign powers.
- Historical Context - French Revolution
 - Unlike the American colonies, France was a long-existing nation state.
 - France was almost uniformly Catholic while the American colonies had considerable religious pluralism.
 - France had a rigid, legally-based three-tiered class system.
 - The National Assembly (that created the Declaration of Rights) was attempting to simply reform the monarchy.
 - French intellectuals were greatly influenced by deism, the belief in a distant God who did not play a daily role in people's lives and did not have human form (like Jesus).

Part 3: Primary Source Analysis Activity (45 minutes)

Prepare students to do primary source analysis by examining the two sample excerpts below. Since they both have archaic language, it is advised that you read them aloud with students, stopping to discuss and explain the sentences and any challenging words (which have been defined in brackets).

If students have personal devices, create a sharable document. Divide them into five groups and have each work on one of the following questions. Then project it to the



entire class and go over them. If not, simply have each group work on paper and present their findings.

- 1) In the French one, rights do not come from God, but instead "representatives of the French people." Why did they write it this way? What is the significance of rights emanating from the people rather than God?
- 2) The French one specifically mentions the French people while the U.S. Declaration does not use the term "American." What might account for this difference? What might this tell you about the national identity of each?
- 3) The French one states that people are "born free and equal in respect to their rights" while the American one states: "created equal." Discuss the difference and why it matters. Which would you rather be?
- 4) Why might the American Declaration appeal to peoples around the world in a way the French might not. Why is the American Declaration more universal? Identify terms in it that make it so.
- 5) The French one does not mention the right of revolution, but the American Declaration does. Why does this matter?

Part 4: Reflection (10 minutes)

Ask students to summarize and reflect on the major points:

- The Declaration of Independence has universal appeal.
- It would inspire similar declarations in Latin America (Haiti) and Asia (Vietnam).
- The Declaration of Independence stressed the equality of people, not simply equal rights, making it more politically explosive.
- Both Declarations emphasize human rights.



Declaration of Independence (1776)

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable [unchangeable] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence [caution], indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed [willing] to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations [violations], pursuing invariably the same Object [goal] evinces [shows] a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism [tyranny], it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards [protections] for their future security.

Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789)

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities [disasters] and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social body [the French people], shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions [governments] and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable [unquestionable] principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound [result in] to the happiness of all.

Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices [support of] of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizens:

I. Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility.

