

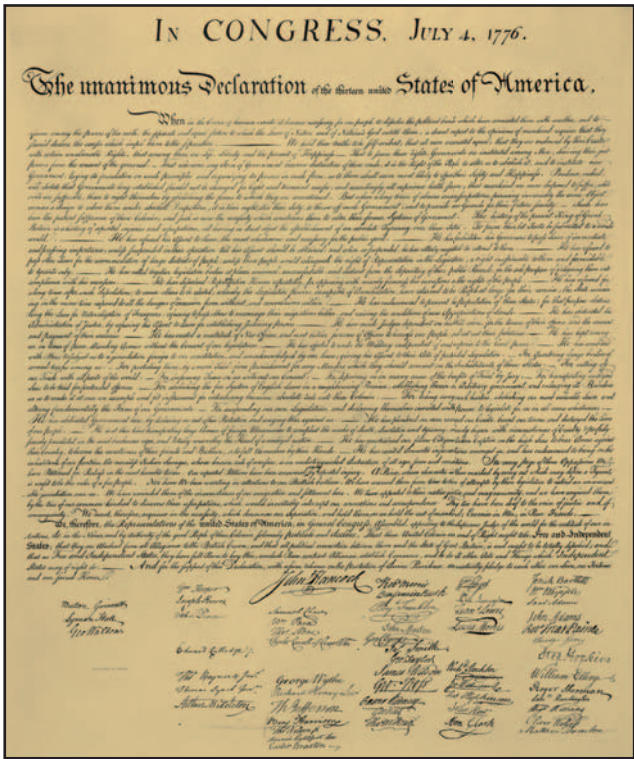
Inalienable Rights

“All men are created equal” and are born with certain inalienable rights. These include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and no government is allowed to take them away. So began Thomas Jefferson as he wrote our Declaration of Independence. These ideas, he said, were intended to be “an expression of the American mind.”

The British saw the Declaration as a statement of treason—a hanging offense! But the threat of being hanged didn’t keep Jefferson from writing such words and sharing these ideals.

After the Revolution when the American colonies had won their independence from England, the Continental Congress formed a government, but it didn’t work. (The Continental Congress was made up of representatives of the 13 states.) A convention was called in 1787 to create a new constitution for a new government. In that meeting, delegates

Inalienable or unalienable?
The final draft of the Declaration of Independence speaks of our “unalienable” rights. More commonly, however, we refer to “inalienable” rights. In his later writings, Jefferson used “inalienable.”



The Declaration of Independence

began to decide how the power of the new government would be divided between the states and the nation.

Jefferson had seen how England treated the American colonists. He didn’t trust powerful governments to guard people’s rights. He believed that certain freedoms had to be written into the new American constitution to protect the rights of American citizens. Our lives and our freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and more—had to be formally protected from government interference.



The Bill of Rights

Jefferson, who was serving as an ambassador in France at the time, was disappointed. There was no plan to include a list of our rights in the constitution. In letter after letter to James Madison (a key member of the Virginia government and the Continental Congress), Jefferson wrote, “I do not like . . . the omission of a bill of rights providing clearly . . . for freedom of religion, freedom of the

press [and so forth].” “The general voice from north to south . . . calls for a bill of rights,” he wrote.

In offering advice to Madison, Jefferson voiced the people’s wishes. Many states also wanted a bill of rights. Madison, who respected Jefferson’s opinions, came to agree with him. In 1789, while Jefferson served as President Washington’s Secretary of State, the Bill of Rights was passed by Congress with Madison’s help. The rights outlined in the Bill of Rights became the first 10 amendments—additions or changes—to the Constitution. It’s no accident that they are the same rights that Jefferson urged Madison to consider in his frequent letters.

Did Jefferson predict correctly? Would America be a free country without the Bill of Rights? Fortunately, we don’t have to find out. The amendments still stand, protecting our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Thank you, Mr. Jefferson.

Adapted from an article by Leigh Anderson

A Few Facts:

The Declaration of Independence was a statement to England explaining why America wanted to break away and become its own country. On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to accept the Declaration of Independence and declare independence from England.

The Constitution, signed in 1787 after America won freedom from England, told what kind of government the people of the new country, America, wanted to set up. It defined the three branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial) and explained the

rights of the people. We still live by the principles of the Constitution today.

The **Bill of Rights** is the first ten amendments (changes) to the Constitution. These ten amendments define basic freedoms, such as freedom of speech, that all Americans are guaranteed.

The Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights are kept in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., today.