The Promise of America

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The Declaration of Independence

Adapted by Timothy Rasinski

A reader’s theater for six voices: three narrators (N) and three readers of the Declaration of Independence (D)

N1: This is the story

N2: of the birth of the


N2: At one time the United States was made up of colonies of Great Britain. However, people in the colonies began to feel that the king of Great Britain was exerting more control over them than they felt was warranted.

N2–N3: Colonists began to call for the separation of the North American colonies from Great Britain. They began to call for independence.

N3: The king had imposed on the colonies laws and taxes that the colonists felt were unfair.

N1–N3: The king had also ignored petitions, or requests, from the colonies that their grievances be heard.

N1: And so, one by one, the various colonies began to demand independence from Great Britain. By May 1776, eight colonies had decided that they would support independence.

N2: On May 15, 1776, the largest colony, Virginia, resolved that:

N2–N3: “The delegates appointed to represent this colony in General Congress be instructed to propose to that respectable body to declare the United Colonies free and independent states.”

N3: The Continental Congress was the governing body of the 13 colonies. It met a few weeks later in Philadelphia. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia read this resolution to the Continental Congress:
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The Declaration of Independence (cont.)

N1: “Be it resolved: That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

N2: A committee of five members was then formed to create a written statement of freedom from Great Britain.

N3: The members of the committee consisted of two men from New England: John Adams from Massachusetts and Roger Sherman from Connecticut;

N1: Two representatives from the middle colonies: Robert Livingston of New York and Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania;

N2: And one southerner: Thomas Jefferson from Virginia.

N3: Jefferson was given the primary task of writing the document.

N1: By the end of June, Jefferson had completed his declaration. It was sent to the Continental Congress on July 1.

N2: There was some discussion and revision to the declaration.

N3: And, although the independence that the colonies sought was not totally realized until several years later,

N1: the declaration began a new country whose history is still being written today—our country,

N1–N3: The United States of America.

N2: On July 4, 1776, the declaration was adopted by the Continental Congress. Church bells throughout Philadelphia rang out in celebration as the declaration was read to the people.
The Declaration of Independence (cont.)

D1–D3: In Congress, July 4, 1776, the unanimous declaration of the 13 United States of America:

D2: (slowly and deliberately) 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,

D3: a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

D1: 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

All: That among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

D2: That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

D1: That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it and institute a new Government, laying its foundation on principles and organizing itself in a way that to them shall seem most likely to bring their Safety and Happiness.

D3: Prudence, indeed, will dictate that long established governments should not be changed for light and transient causes;

D2: But, when a long train of abuses reduces and oppresses the people, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and provide a new government for their future security.

D1: Such has been how the Colonies have suffered.

D2: And such is now the necessity which forces them to alter their former government.
The Declaration of Independence (cont.)

D3: The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and taking of rights and liberties, all done to establish an absolute Tyranny over these States . . . .

D1: In every stage of these Oppressions, we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms from the King.

D2: Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.

D3: A Prince whose character is thus marked by acts that define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people . . . .

D1: We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled here,

D2: Appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare

D3: That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States,

D2: That they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown,

D1: And that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.

D3: And that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

D1: And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.
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The Declaration of Independence (cont.)

All: This is the story of the birth of the United States of America—Our Country.

*My country, 'tis of thee,*  
*Sweet land of liberty,*  
*Of thee I sing;*  
*Land where my fathers died,*  
*Land of the pilgrims' pride,*  
*From every mountainside,*  
*Let freedom ring!*

Background Information

It took Jefferson about two weeks to write the Declaration of Independence. He borrowed his ideas of independence from an Englishman named John Locke who had lived years before. Up to that point, powerful rulers ran all nations. So, to declare independence was a very bold statement.

Extension Suggestion

Think about how King George III felt when he read these words. What would he have written in response to this document? Work with two friends to write a response. It should be a reader’s theater for three voices. Then practice reading your response aloud. When you are ready, perform your piece for the rest of your class.