

The Declaration of Independence: 1776–2026

Activities for Grades 7–8



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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Precursors to the Declaration	2
Materials Needed	2
The Declaration’s Descendants	2
Materials Needed	2
Nonfiction Excerpt 1.....	6
Nonfiction Excerpt 2.....	7
Nonfiction Excerpt 3.....	8
Nonfiction Excerpt 4.....	9
Activity Page 1	10
Nonfiction Excerpt 5.....	11
Nonfiction Excerpt 6.....	12
Nonfiction Excerpt 7.....	13

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Core Knowledge History and Geography™

Introduction

IMPLEMENTATION NOTE

The following activities trace the development and influence of the Declaration of Independence. While the activities are meant to work together, each one can stand alone. Implement any or all of these activities based on your available time.

We recommend that students complete at least one of the following CKHG lessons before starting these activities:

- *A History of the United States, Volume 1*, Chapters 4–5
- *Civics and Economics in U.S. History*, “Civics in U.S. History,” Chapter 2
- *World History, Volume 2*, Chapters 3–4
- *Civics and Economics in World History*, “Civics in World History,” Chapter 5

If you are implementing these activities before students complete the recommended lessons, we suggest calling back to these activities when they do encounter those lessons.

The activity directions include time allocations. These are only suggestions. You may need to extend or adjust the activity time to better accommodate your students.

Precursors to the Declaration

Materials Needed

- Sufficient copies of “Excerpts from the Declaration of Independence” **(NFE 1)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Declaration of Arbroath, April 6, 1320” **(NFE 2)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Dutch Act of Abjuration, July 26, 1581” **(NFE 3)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Common Sense by Thomas Paine (1776)” **(NFE 4)**
- sufficient copies of Venn Diagram **(AP 1)**

Note: The NFEs and AP can be found at the end of this activities file for you to print and copy.

Document Analysis

The Declaration of Independence redefined the purpose of government in many ways. However, the ideas within it did not appear out of thin air. Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, was a student of history and philosophy. The principles that he enshrined in the Declaration of Independence had roots in the past, from the earliest civilizations, to classical empires, to medieval kingdoms, to the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. In this activity, students will draw connections between the Declaration of Independence and some of the documents that inspired it.

Distribute copies of “Excerpts from the Declaration of Independence” (NFE 1), and have students read it aloud, popcorn style. Encourage students to underline key words and phrases as they read, as well as any unfamiliar vocabulary. Have students look up the meanings of the unfamiliar vocabulary that they identified.

Turn and Talk: What are the most important ideas in the document we just read?

Organize students into groups of four or five students, and have each group sit together. Assign each group one of the following excerpts:

- “Excerpt from Declaration of Arbroath” **(NFE 2)**
- “Excerpt from The Dutch Act of Abjuration” **(NFE 3)**
- “Excerpt from Common Sense by Thomas Paine” **(NFE 4)**

If there are more than three groups, multiple groups may be assigned the same excerpt.

Distribute the excerpts and have each group read through their assigned document together. Again, encourage them to underline key words, interesting phrases, and unfamiliar vocabulary and to identify the document's main or most important ideas. Remind students that some of these writings are from a long time ago, even before the Declaration of Independence itself, and use very different language from what they are used to. If a group is struggling, you may suggest that they try to put confusing sentences into their own words to make the ideas clearer.

After the groups have examined their assigned documents, ask them to compare their documents to the Declaration of Independence. Distribute Venn Diagram (AP 1), and have the students work together to identify three ways in which the two documents are similar or different. These can include shared ideas, differing ideas, shared key words, and similar phrases. They do not have to find three words and sentences that are exactly identical, just parts that express similar or connected ideas.

(Possible responses:

Common key words: liberty, freedom, right, tyrant

Common ideas: responsibilities and limits of government, religious beliefs, call to action, equality and natural rights, consent of the governed.)

Bring the class back together. Have each group select a presenter and share the connections they found with the rest of the class.

Once all groups have presented, conduct a class discussion about what was shared. You may wish to guide the discussion with these questions:

- Are there any words or ideas that are repeated in all of these documents?
- Which of these documents is the most similar to the Declaration of Independence? Which is the least similar?
- Are there any ideas in the Declaration of Independence that do not appear in any of the documents before it?

The Declaration's Descendants

Materials Needed

- Sufficient copies of “Excerpts from the Declaration of Independence” **(NFE 1)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)” **(NFE 5)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Declaration of the Independence of the Blacks of St. Domingo (1803)” **(NFE 6)**
- sufficient copies of “Excerpt from Proclamation of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945)” **(NFE 7)**
- sufficient copies of Venn Diagram **(AP 1)**

Note: The NFEs and AP can be found at the end of this activities file for you to print and copy.

Document Analysis

The Declaration of Independence was a result of many steps forward throughout history, but it was not the end of the road. The American Revolution and Declaration of Independence presented a strong model to the rest of the world for how to banish tyranny and establish the identity and principles of a new or reborn nation. In the 250 years since, many new nations around the world have been established and reformed, and many such instances were accompanied by a document of similar purpose. As founders around the world have sought to shake off oppression, many have looked to the Declaration of Independence as a prototype for their founding documents.

In this activity, students will draw connections between the Declaration of Independence and some of the documents that it inspired.

Distribute or have students take out their copies of “Excerpts from the Declaration of Independence” (NFE 1) from the previous activity. If students did not complete the Precursors activity, have them read through the Declaration and identify its main ideas.

Organize the class into groups of four or five students each. If students completed the Precursors activity, have them work with different classmates this time. Assign each group one of the following excerpts:

- “Excerpt from Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)” **(NFE 5)**

- “Excerpt from Declaration of the Independence of the Blacks of St. Domingo (1803)” **(NFE 6)**
- “Excerpt from Proclamation of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945)” **(NFE 7)**

Distribute the NFEs, and have each group read through their assigned document together. Encourage them to underline key words, interesting phrases, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Then have them identify the main idea(s) of their assigned document.

After the groups have identified the main ideas of their documents, have them compare their assigned document to the Declaration of Independence. Distribute copies of “Venn Diagram” (AP 1). Working as a group, students should identify three ways in which the two documents are similar or different. These can include shared ideas, differing ideas, shared key words, and similar phrases. Remind students that they do not have to find three words and sentences that are exactly identical, just parts that express similar or connected ideas.

(Possible responses:

Common key words: liberty, freedom, right, tyrant, imperialist, equal

Common ideas: responsibilities and limits of government, religious beliefs, call to action, equality and natural rights, consent of the governed, colonialism, economic oppression)

Bring the class back together. Have each group select a presenter and share the connections they found.

Once all groups have presented, conduct a class discussion about the documents. You may wish to guide the discussion with these questions:

- Are there any key words or ideas that are repeated often in these documents?
- Which of these documents is the most similar to the Declaration of Independence? Which is the least similar?
- Are there any ideas in these documents that are not present in the Declaration of Independence?

Conclude the activity by giving the students a chance to reflect on what they have learned. Remind them that the Declaration of Independence still inspires us today, 250 years after its publication, and remains a guiding force of the United States and democracies around the world. Encourage them to remember these ideas in their study of history, and to look for them in current events, both nationally and globally.

Nonfiction Excerpt 1: Excerpts from Declaration of Independence

[The Preamble] 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, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.—

[A Declaration of Rights] 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, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . .

[A Bill of Indictment] Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. . . .

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.—

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only. . . .

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the state remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within. . . .

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies without the consent of our legislatures. . . .

For cutting off our trade with all parts of the world.—

For imposing taxes on us without our consent.—

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury: . . .

For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighbouring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these colonies.

Source: "Declaration of Independence." U.S. National Archives.

Nonfiction Excerpt 2: Excerpt from The Declaration of Arbroath, April 6, 1320

In 1320, the people of Scotland lived under the tyrannical and bloody rule of the English crown. In this document, the Lords and landholders of Scotland assert their independence from the British, and declare unity under a sovereign, Scottish ruler, King Robert.

To the most Holy Father and Lord in Christ, the Lord John, by divine providence Supreme Pontiff of the Holy Roman and Universal Church, his humble and devout sons... and the other barons and freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland send all manner of filial reverence, with devout kisses of his blessed feet.

Most Holy Father and Lord, we know and from the chronicles and books of the ancients we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown...

... Our nation under their protection did indeed live in freedom and peace up to the time when that mighty prince the King of the English, Edward, the father of the one who reigns today, when our kingdom had no head and our people harboured no malice or treachery and were then unused to wars or invasions, came in the guise of a friend and ally to harass them as an enemy. The deeds of cruelty, massacre, violence, pillage, arson, imprisoning prelates, burning down monasteries, robbing and killing monks and nuns, and yet other outrages without number which he committed against our people, sparing neither age nor sex, religion nor rank, no one could describe nor fully imagine unless he had seen them with his own eyes.

But from these countless evils we have been set free, by the help of Him Who though He afflicts yet heals and restores, by our most tireless Prince, King and Lord, the Lord Robert... Yet if he should give up what he has begun, and agree to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom — for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

Therefore it is, Reverend Father and Lord, that we beseech your Holiness with our most earnest prayers and suppliant hearts, inasmuch as you will in your sincerity and goodness consider all this, that, since with Him Whose vice-gerent on earth you are there is neither weighing nor distinction of Jew and Greek, Scotsman or Englishman, you will look with the eyes of a father on the troubles and privation brought by the English upon us and upon the Church of God... But if your Holiness puts too much faith in the tales the English tell and will not give sincere belief to all this, nor refrain from favouring them to our prejudice, then the slaughter of bodies, the perdition of souls, and all the other misfortunes that will follow, inflicted by them on us and by us on them, will, we believe, be surely laid by the Most High to your charge.

Source: "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320." National Records of Scotland.

Nonfiction Excerpt 3: Excerpt from Dutch Act of Abjuration, July 26, 1581

After years of oppressive rule by King Phillip II of Spain, many provinces of the Netherlands joined together in rebellion. At first, their rebellion was directed towards the King's advisors and representatives, avoiding explicit criticism of the King himself. In this document, these provinces renounce their allegiance to Phillip and Spain, and declare their sovereign throne vacant.

As it is apparent to all that a prince is constituted by God to be ruler of a people, to defend them from oppression and violence as the shepherd his sheep; and whereas God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his commands, whether right or wrong, but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects (without which he could be no prince), to govern them according to equity, to love and support them as a father his children or a shepherd his flock, and even at the hazard of life to defend and preserve them. And when he does not behave thus, but, on the contrary, oppresses them, seeking opportunities to infringe their ancient customs and privileges, exacting from them slavish compliance, then he is no longer a prince, but a tyrant, and the subjects are to consider him in no other view. And particularly when this is done deliberately, unauthorized by the states, they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another prince for their defense. This is the only method left for subjects whose humble petitions and remonstrances could never soften their prince or dissuade him from his tyrannical proceedings; and this is what the law of nature dictates for the defense of liberty, which we ought to transmit to posterity, even at the hazard of our lives...

All these considerations give us more than sufficient reason to renounce the King of Spain, and seek some other powerful and more gracious prince to take us under his protection; and, more especially, as these countries have been for these twenty years abandoned to disturbance and oppression by their king, during which time the inhabitants were not treated as subjects, but enemies, enslaved forcibly by their own governors...

So, having no hope of reconciliation, and finding no other remedy, we have, agreeable to the law of nature in our own defense, and for maintaining the rights, privileges, and liberties of our countrymen, wives, and children, and latest posterity from being enslaved by the Spaniards, been constrained to renounce allegiance to the King of Spain, and pursue such methods as appear to us most likely to secure our ancient liberties and privileges...

Source: "Act of Abjuration." Directors of the Old South Work, Old South Meeting-house, Boston, MA. Online at the University of Virginia Library.

Nonfiction Excerpt 4: Excerpt from Common Sense by Thomas Paine (1776)

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense. . . .

I have heard it asserted by some, that as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk that is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer . . . that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice of her. The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

But she has protected us, say some. . . . We have boasted the protection of Great Britain, without considering, that her motive was interest not attachment. . . . This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. . . . As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do, while, by her dependence on Britain, she is made the make-weight in the scale of British politics.

No man was a warmer wisher for a reconciliation than myself, before the fatal nineteenth of April, 1775 [the day of the battles of Lexington and Concord], but the moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England forever; and disdain the wretch, that with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul. . . .

Where, say some, is the king of America? I'll tell you, Friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the royal brute of Great Britain.... So far as we approve of monarchy . . . in America the law is king. . . .

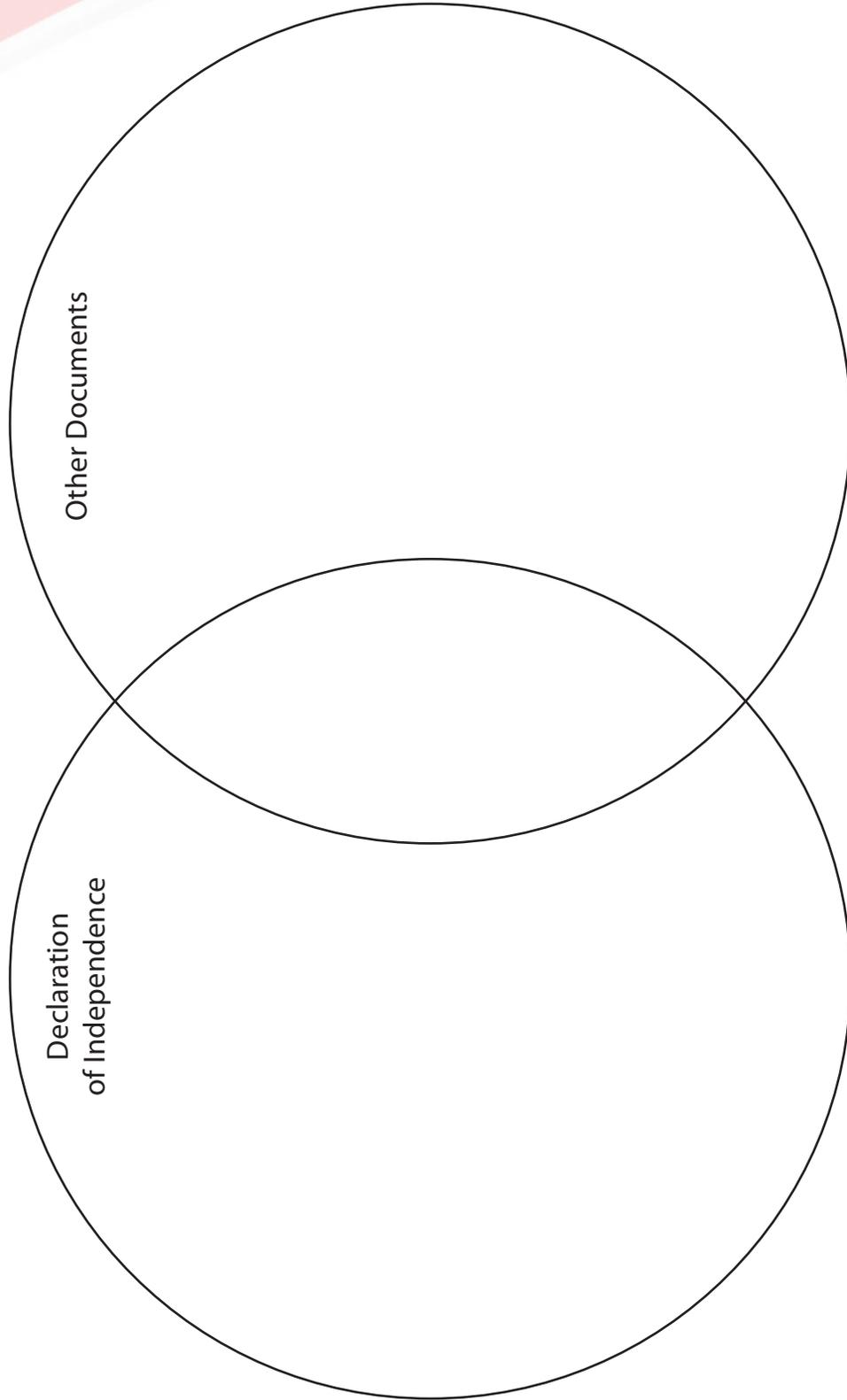
A government of our own is our natural right. . . . Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do: ye are opening the door to eternal tyranny. . . .

O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

Source: Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. W. & T. Bradford, 1776.

Name _____ Date _____

Venn Diagram



Nonfiction Excerpt 5: Excerpt from Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)

In 1789, at the start of what became the French Revolution, members of France's Estates-General defied the French king and formed their own National Assembly. One of the first acts of this new National Assembly was to craft a document they called "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" that stated their philosophy of government and natural rights

The representatives of the French People, formed into a National Assembly, considering ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the rights of man to be the only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn Declaration, the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man, to the end that this Declaration, constantly present to all members of the body politic, may remind them unceasingly of their rights and their duties; to the end that the acts of the legislative power and those of the executive power, since they may be continually compared with the aim of every political institution, may thereby be the more respected; to the end that the demands of the citizens, founded henceforth on simple and incontestable principles, may always be directed toward the maintenance of the Constitution and the happiness of all.

In consequence whereof, the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

Article first

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.

Article 2

The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Man. These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety and Resistance to Oppression...

Article 6

The Law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, personally or through their representatives, in its making. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, shall be equally eligible to all high offices, public positions and employments, according to their ability, and without other distinction than that of their virtues and talents...

Article 10

No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not interfere with the established Law and Order.

Source: "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)." *The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the American Bill of Rights: a bicentennial commemoration issued pursuant to S.J. Res. 317, 100th Congress.* 1989. pp. 1-2.

Nonfiction Excerpt 6: Excerpt from Declaration of Independence of the Blacks of St. Domingo (1803)

While France was experiencing its own revolution and the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, its colony of Saint Domingo (present-day Haiti) declared—and eventually won—its independence from French rule.

In the Name of the Black People, and Men of Color of St. Domingo:

The Independence of St. Domingo is proclaimed. Restored to our primitive dignity, we have asserted our rights; we swear never to yield them to any power on earth; the frightful veil of prejudice is torn to pieces, be it so for ever. Woe be to them who would dare to put together its bloody tatters.

Oh! Landholders of St. Domingo, wandering in foreign countries, by proclaiming our independence, we do not forbid you, indiscriminately, from returning to your property; far be from us this unjust idea.... Toward those men who do us justice, we will act as brothers; let them rely for ever on our esteem and friendship; let them return among us. The God who protects us, the God of Freemen, bids us to stretch out towards them our conquering arms. But as for those, who, intoxicated with foolish pride, interested slaves of a guilty pretension, are blinded so much as to believe themselves the essence of human nature, and assert that they are destined by heaven to be our masters and our tyrants, let them never come near the land of St. Domingo: if they come hither, they will only meet with chains or deportation; then let them stay where they are; tormented by their well-deserved misery, and the frowns of the just men whom they have too long mocked, let them still continue to move, unpitied and unnoticed by all.

We have sworn not to listen with clemency towards all those who would dare to speak to us of slavery; we will be inexorable, perhaps even cruel, towards all troops who, themselves forgetting the object for which they have not ceased fighting since 1780, should come from Europe to bring among us death and servitude. Nothing is too dear, and all means are lawful to men from whom it is wished to tear the first of all blessings....

In the various commotions that took place, some inhabitants against whom we had not to complain, have been victims by the cruelty of a few soldiers or cultivators, too much blinded by the remembrance of their past sufferings to be able to distinguish the good and humane land-owners from those that were unfeeling and cruel, we lament with all feeling souls so deplorable an end, and declare to the world, whatever may be said to the contrary by wicked people, that the murders were committed contrary to the wishes of our hearts.... But now a-days the Aurora of peace hails us, with the glimpse of a less stormy time; now that the calm of victory has succeeded to the trouble of a dreadful war, every thing in St. Domingo ought to assume a new face, and its government henceforward be that of justice.

Source: "Declaration of the Independence of the Blacks of St. Domingo." *Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*. Marcus Rainsford, Esq. Albion Press. 1805. pp. 439-441.

Nonfiction Excerpt 7: Excerpt from Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, September 2, 1945

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In the broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights".

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice...

They have robbed us of our ricefields, our mines, our forests and our raw materials. They have monopolized the issuing of the bank-notes and the export trade.

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty...

For these reasons, we, the members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligations that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland....

For these reasons, we, the members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country – and in fact it is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

Source: "Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." *Documents of the August 1945 Revolution In Vietnam*. Translated by C. Kiriloff. Edited by Rima Rathausky. Dept. of International Relations, Australian National University, 1963. pp. 66-68.

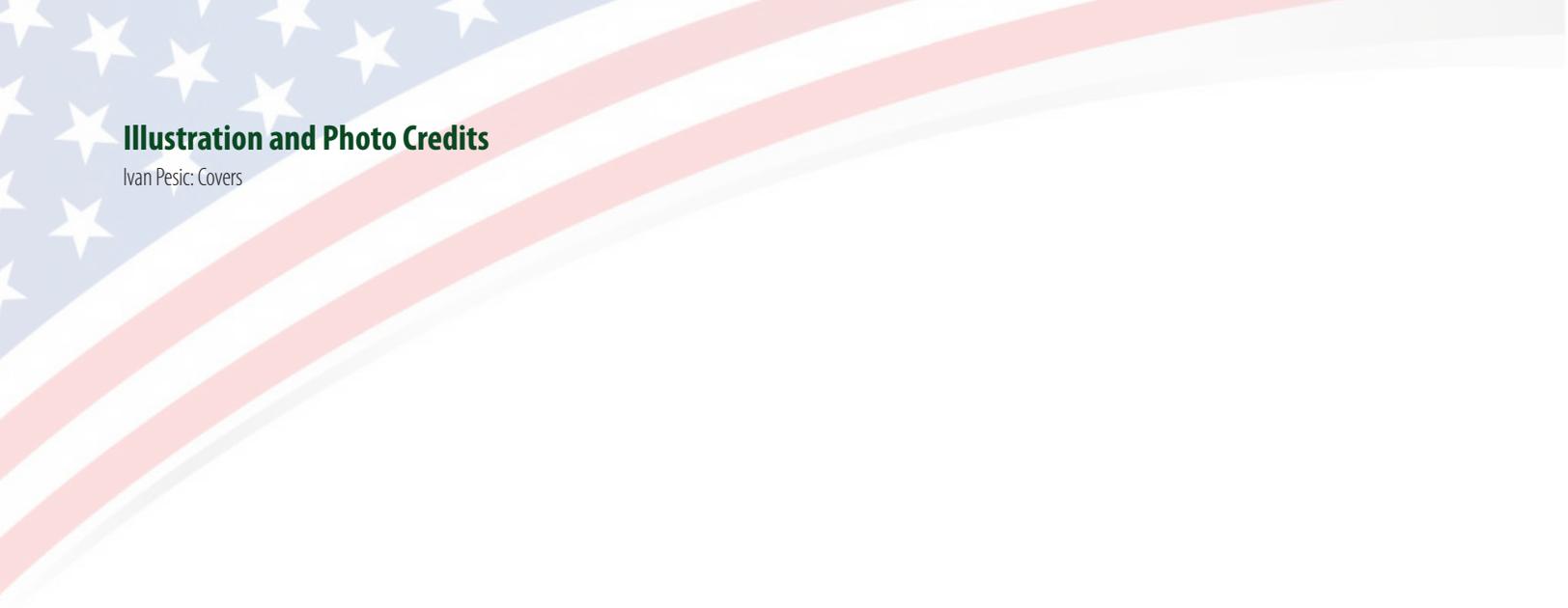
The top of the page features a stylized graphic of the American flag, with white stars on a blue field in the upper left corner and red and white wavy stripes curving across the top of the page.

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