

Lesson 1: Declaring Independence

Vocabulary

Second Continental Congress a meeting in which colonial leaders made decisions about problems with Britain

Continental Army an army with soldiers from all 13 colonies

Olive Branch Petition a letter from the colonists to King George III of Britain

Declaration of Independence a document explaining why the colonies wanted independence

traitor a person who works against his or her country

The Second Continental Congress

The **Second Continental Congress** began meeting in Philadelphia in May 1775. The Congress formed the **Continental Army** with soldiers from all 13 colonies. George Washington was elected to lead the Continental Army. The Congress sent King George III a letter called the **Olive Branch Petition**. The letter said that the colonists were still loyal to Great Britain. They did not want to fight a war. The Congress asked the king to give the colonists more self-government. The king said that he would use force to end the rebellion.

“Time to Part”

Thomas Paine was a colonist. In 1776 he wrote a pamphlet called *Common Sense*. The pamphlet convinced many Americans to support the colonies’ independence from Britain. The Continental Congress wanted to make sure every colony supported independence. It set up a group to put together the **Declaration of Independence**. The Declaration of Independence explained why the colonies wanted independence. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson decided what would be in the Declaration of Independence. Then Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.


The Declaration of Independence

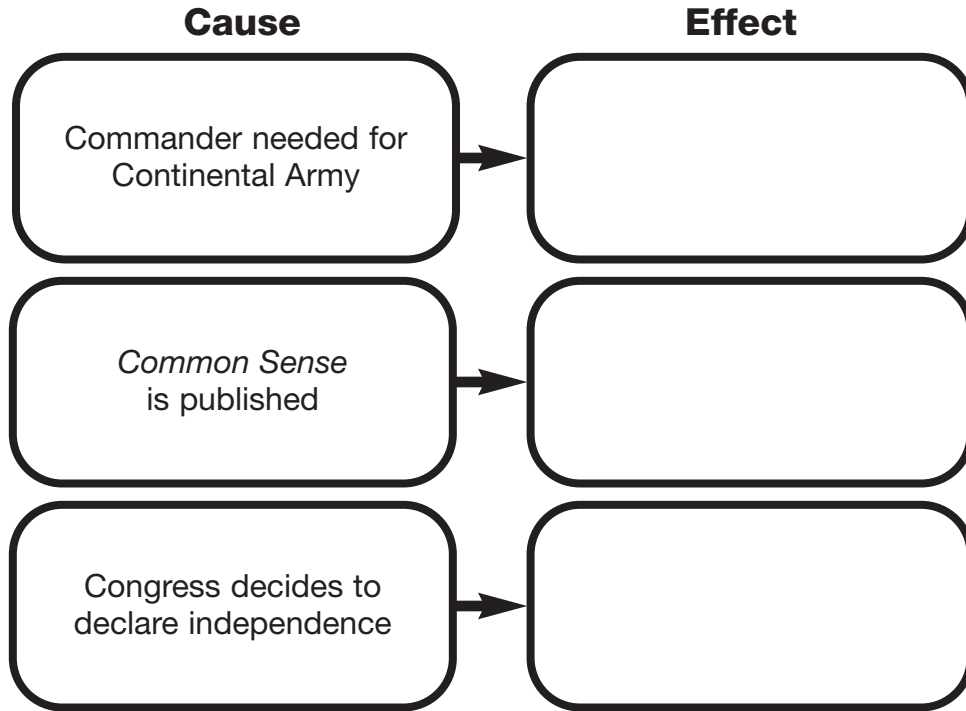
In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that people are born with rights that cannot be taken away. These are the right to live, to be free, and to seek happiness. He also wrote that if a government tries to take away these rights, the people have the right to form a new government. The Declaration listed the ways Britain tried to take away colonists’ rights. For example, it said that Britain taxed the colonists without their consent. This list showed that the king had abused the colonists’ rights. Therefore, the colonists had the right to declare independence and form a new government. Those who signed the Declaration promised to defend the new nation.

A Dangerous Decision

The Declaration of Independence was approved by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. In August members of the Congress signed the Declaration. They knew it would be dangerous to sign it. The British government would think they were **traitors**. Traitors are people who work against their country.

Lesson 1: Review

1.  **Cause and Effect** Fill in the missing effects of the major events from this lesson.



2. Describe two important decisions made by the Continental Congress.

3. How did Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* help lead to the Declaration of Independence?

4. Describe Thomas Jefferson’s role in creating the Declaration of Independence.

5. **Critical Thinking: Express Ideas** Do you think it took courage to sign the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?
