



The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution and Amendments

Thomas Jefferson (1743 - 1826), The Constitutional Convention

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Length:	1 hours and 5 minutes	Catalog:	DB-1191
Language:	English	UPC:	0683422135118
Style:	Solo	MSLP:	\$9.99
Genre:	Political Philosophy, History		

The Declaration of Independence

When we celebrate the 4th of July in the United State, officially called Independence Day, we are celebrating the signing of The Declaration of Independence, which was ratified by the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776. The American Revolutionary War with the Kingdom of Great Britain had already been underway for over a year at the time. John Adams led the effort to push for independence, which was considered and passed by the congress unanimously on July 2. The document was to be a list of grievances against King George II and the assertion of natural and legal rights designed

to explain why the Congress had voted to declare independence. Adams persuaded the drafting committee of five to appoint Thomas Jefferson to compose the declaration, which he did under the editorial supervision of Adams and Benjamin Franklin.

United States Constitution

The United States constitution articulates the structure and powers of the United States government and serves as the supreme law of the land. It originally consisted of seven articles. The first three set forth the division of the government into three branches – legislative, executive, and judicial – and the doctrine of the separation of powers. Articles four, five and six embed the concepts of federalism and the rights and responsibilities of the states in relation to the national government. The seventh article established the procedure used to ratify the Constitution. The document, which replaced the Articles of Confederation of 1777, was created by the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, ratified June 21, 1788 and put into force in 1789.

Amendments to the Constitution

As a matter of principle, the original language of the articles and all amendments made thereto remain intact and can only be modified in their operation by a succeeding amendment. This practice was put into force with the first series of ten amendments proposed in 1789 and ratified in 1791 that are known collectively as the Bill of Rights. During the process of ratification, Anti-Federalists pushed for an articulation of rights not defined in the seven articles of the constitution, and several states refused to ratify the Constitution without a Bill of Rights. The first eight amendments define certain additional rights, such as the freedom of speech and the right to bear arms. Amendment nine provides for the eventual recognition of rights not yet enumerated, and amendment ten limits the rights of the federal government to only those granted by the Constitution. There are twenty-seven amendments in all, with four additional still awaiting ratification, with the oldest dating from 1789.