

**American Self-Government:
The First and Second Continental Congress**

*“...the eyes of the virtuous all over the earth are turned with anxiety on us,
as the only depositories of the sacred fire of liberty, and...our falling into anarchy would decide forever the destinies of
mankind, and seal the political heresy that man is incapable of self-government.”*
~ Thomas Jefferson

Overview

Students will explore the movement of the colonies towards self-government by examining the choices made by the Second Continental Congress, noting how American delegates were influenced by philosophers such as John Locke. Students will participate in an activity in which they assume the role of a Congressional member in the year 1775 and devise a plan for America after the onset of war. This lesson can optionally end with a Socratic Seminar or translation activity on the Declaration of Independence.

Grades

Middle & High School

Materials

- “American Self Government – First & Second Continental Congress Power Point,” available in Carolina K-12’s Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format): <https://k12database.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2021/01/AmericanSelfGovtContCongressPPT.pdf>
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- *The Bostonians Paying the Excise Man*, image attached or available in power point
- *The Battle of Lexington*, image attached or available in power point
- *Welcome to the Second Continental Congress*, activity attached
- Lesson 1 in *We the People, The Citizen and the Constitution*, (optional)
- The Declaration of Independence Modern Translation Activity, attached (optional)

Essential Questions

- What were the Intolerable Acts and how did their passing impact tensions between the colonies and the King?
- What was the role and purpose of the First Continental Congress?
- What was the role and purpose of the Second Continental Congress?
- What response did the Second Continental Congress have to the escalating tensions between the colonies and the King?
- In what ways did the Continental Congress represent the budding spirit of American self-government?
- Who was John Locke and what were his philosophies on government and freedom as described in the Second Treatise?
- What was the purpose of the Declaration of Independence?
- How do John Locke’s views compare and contrast to those presented in the Declaration of Independence?
- What were the Mecklenburg Resolves and the Halifax Resolves, and how do these documents compare to the Declaration of Independence?
- Why is the Declaration of Independence relevant to us today?

Duration

90 minutes

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic understanding of the tensions mounting during the pre-Revolutionary period and the reasons for such tensions. See Carolina K-12's lesson, *Causes of the American Revolution*, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (k12database.unc.edu)

Procedure

Tensions Rise: The Intolerable Acts

1. As a warm-up, project the image on Slide 3 of the *American Self Government – First & Second Continental Congress Power Point* (also attached), *The Bostonians Paying the Excise-Man*, and ask students to discuss:
 - What do you see? What physical details, structures, people, colors, etc. do you notice?
 - What does it appear is being done to the man in the middle? Why do you think this is occurring?
 - What do you notice about the tree?
 - What do you imagine took place before this moment in time? What led these characters to this point? (Encourage students to consider what the story of this image is.)
 - If this frozen image came alive, what do you predict would happen next? (If time permits, students can be given the assignment to artistically render a "Part II" image to accompany this one.)
 - What message is the artist trying to convey?
2. Finally, explain to students that generally, this image is interpreted as representing several Bostonians pouring tea down the throat of a tarred and feathered tax collector. The tree in back represents a "Liberty Tree"; it is likely students will guess what the noose is for. To the left is a vignette of patriots dumping tea into the harbor. It is likely that this was rendered in response to Britain's passage of the **Intolerable Acts**.
3. Review the Intolerable Acts with students, reminding them that "Intolerable Acts" was a popular name given by Americans to four laws passed by the British Parliament in 1774 in response to the Boston Tea Party. The Intolerable Acts, also called Coercive Acts, were intended to punish the colony of Massachusetts for destroying tea that belonged to the East India Company and to show the other American colonies what might happen if they disobeyed British policies. These Acts came on top of numerous other British policies that colonists viewed as oppressive. Resentment of these acts contributed to the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775.

The First Continental Congress

4. Project slide 4 and tell students that the colonists did not just respond to the Intolerable Acts with political cartoons. They also took a large step in establishing the **First Continental Congress**, due to the growing colonial concern regarding British **tyranny** (unjust use of power.) Delegates from twelve of the thirteen colonies (Georgia did not send representatives) met on September 5, 1774 at **Carpenters' Hall** in **Philadelphia** to discuss their concerns regarding what they felt were unfair taxation policies and laws, such as the Coercive Acts/Intolerable Acts. North Carolina representatives **Richard Caswell**, **William Hooper**, and **Joseph Hewes** attended the First Continental Congress where the 56 men in attendance considered options such as an economic boycott of British trade, published a list of rights and grievances, and petitioned King George for redress of those grievances. The Congress also called for another Continental Congress in the event that their petition was unsuccessful in halting enforcement of the Intolerable Acts. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Continental_Congress) Discuss:
 - How do you predict King George responded to the petition noting colonists' grievances?

The Plot Thickens: The Battles of Lexington and Concord

5. Project the attached image of the *Battle of Lexington* on slide 5 and discuss:
 - What do you see? What appears to be happening in this image?
 - In your opinion, who is winning this struggle?

- How do you think this situation will end?

6. Move on to slides 6 & 7 and tell the students who earlier predicted that the First Continental Congress' actions would not be well-received by King George that they were correct. Explain to students that they are viewing a painting of the Battle of Lexington, a brief skirmish that became known as the first military clash in the American Revolution. It took place on April 19, 1775, between approximately 70 colonial minutemen and about 700 British soldiers marching on Concord, Massachusetts. The American Patriots were warned of the British approach by Paul Revere and others and assembled to halt the British. Inspired by the words of Captain Parker: "Stand your ground; don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here," the Americans refused to disperse when ordered to do so by the commander of the British advance units. Gunfire was exchanged and eight Americans were killed before the minutemen retreated. This is most commonly known as the Battle of Lexington and Concord. The appeal of the First Continental Congress had no effect. Thus, the **Second Continental Congress** was convened in May of 1775 to organize the defense of the colonies at the onset of the American Revolutionary War.

Group Activity: Second Continental Congress

7. Project slide 8, divide students into small groups, and handout the attached "Welcome to the Second Continental Congress" activity. Explain the activity to students and give them approximately 15-20 minutes to review their notes, refer to their text, and discuss the situation the colonies are in. They should then begin brainstorming their ideas of what to do about it. Circulate between groups and assist when needed. After you feel sufficient time has passed, allow groups to present their ideas to the class, making sure they explain why they made the choices that they did.
8. Finally, project slide 9 and explain the actual steps the Second Continental Congress took, and compare them to the ideas groups came up with. As you note the following steps, discuss with students why they believe Congress made these choices:
 - Congress created the **Continental Army** on June 14, 1775, to oppose the British.
 - They appointed **General George Washington** as commander-in-chief the following day.
 - On July 8, 1775, they extended the **Olive Branch Petition** to the crown as an attempt at reconciliation. King George III refused to receive it.
 - **Silas Deane** was sent to France as a minister (ambassador) of the Congress.
 - American ports were reopened in defiance of the **Navigation Acts**.
 - Most importantly, in **July 1776**, they declared **independence**.

The Concept of Self-Government

9. Project slide 10 and focus students on the terms self-government, natural rights, and common good. Instruct students to brainstorm a list of everything that comes to mind when hearing each phrase. After several minutes, allow students to share their thoughts with the entire class, ensuring students end up with a final understanding of each term similar to:
 - **Self-Government:** practicing of political independence by citizens
 - **Natural Rights:** basic rights that no individual or government can deny
 - **Common Good:** the good of a community or a larger group
10. Encourage students to begin connecting these concepts to colonial history and the work of the Second Continental Congress by asking:
 - How does the concept of "self-government" apply to the Continental Congress?
 - How do you infer that the Continental Congress viewed natural rights? How did they incorporate the idea of natural rights into their decisions, and future documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution?
 - Evaluate the Continental Congress's decisions in terms of looking out for the interests of the common good.

- How did the delegates of the Second Continental Congress help to form and shape the identity of America and American democracy?
- As the Continental Congress begins to create an American government “from scratch”, what do you think they will rely on (i.e. picking and choosing pieces of the British government, philosophers such as John Locke, their own ideals, etc.)? What challenges do you predict they will face?

11. Project [slide 11](#) and explain that in June 1776, the Second Continental Congress formed a committee consisting of John Adams of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Robert R. Livingston of Oregon, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. This "Committee of Five" was formed to draft a suitable **Declaration of Independence**.

Discuss with students that while American founders such as Jefferson were developing America’s ideas of self-government, they were influenced by others just the same. Project [slide 12](#), which contains a quote from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, such as:

- If man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said; if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to no body, why will he part with his freedom? Why will he give up this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others: for all being kings as much as he, every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure. This makes him willing to quit a condition, which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers: and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property.

12. Ask students to ponder the quote silently. Discuss:

- What is Locke’s philosophy of natural rights?
- What rights did Locke believe all people should have?
- What is Locke’s view on government and property?
- How did Locke view the balance between freedom and governmental control?
- Do you agree or disagree with Locke’s philosophy? Explain.

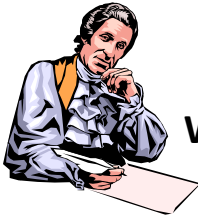
13. Share the information on [slide 13](#), ensuring students understand that John Locke was a 17th century English philosopher who argued a government could only be legitimate if it received the consent of the governed through a social contract and protected the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. If such consent was not given, argued Locke, citizens had a right of rebellion. Locke's ideas had an enormous influence on the development of political philosophy, and he is widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers and contributors to liberal theory. His writings influenced the American revolutionaries as reflected in the American Declaration of Independence.

14. Culminate the lesson with a discussion of the Thomas Jefferson quote on [slide 14](#):

- “...the eyes of the virtuous all over the earth are turned with anxiety on us, as the only depositories of the sacred fire of liberty, and...our falling into anarchy would decide forever the destinies of mankind, and seal the political heresy that man is incapable of self-government.”

15. **Optional homework assignments:**

- Instruct students to read the Declaration of Independence, considering how Locke’s views influenced Jefferson’s writing. (If teachers plan to lead the attached culminating Socratic Seminar on the Declaration, it is recommended that students be instructed to create 3-5 open-ended discussion questions based on their reading of the document.)
- Teachers who choose not to lead the Seminar may want to assign the attached *The Declaration of Independence, A Modern Translation Activity* for students to complete in partners or small groups.



Welcome to the Second Continental Congress!

You are members of the **Second Continental Congress** in **May, 1775**. Just last month, violence between colonists and the British erupted with the outbreak of the **Battles of Lexington and Concord** on April 19, 1775. You and your fellow delegates are responsible for creating a Plan of Action, keeping the colonies best interests in mind.

1. First, choose your responsibility in your group:
 - **Facilitator:** You are responsible for: leading the group through the creation of a Plan of Action; facilitating the review, brainstorming, and final decision making process as described below; contributing thoughts and ideas throughout the entire activity; keeping your group on track at all times and ensuring everyone contributes and participates
 - **Presenter:** You are responsible for: following the direction of the facilitator; contributing thoughts and ideas throughout the review, brainstorming, and final decision making process; and presenting the final plan of action to the remainder of the Second Continental Congressional delegates (aka, your classmates!)
 - **Secretary:** You are responsible for: following the direction of the facilitator; contributing thoughts and ideas throughout the review, brainstorming, and final decision making process; taking detailed notes throughout the entire activity; and writing out a neat and accurate final copy of your group's "Plan of Action" that will be read by the Presenter and then turned in for a grade
2. As a group, begin by considering the situation the colonies are in as of May, 1775.
 - What has taken place up until this point? Review everything that has caused tension between the colonies and King George/Britain.
 - Also consider the realistic position the colonies are in. You have fallen under Britain's government and law since your inception. Thus, consider everything you'll need to do if you choose to wage war and rebel.
3. As delegates to the Second Continental Congress, you are the decision-making body representing the 13 colonies, who are growing angrier by the minute. Based on your review, your understanding of the current situation in the colonies and the fact that an official battle took place between British troops and colonists, brainstorm ideas for an official Plan of Action. Consider all the options (i.e. declare war, try to make peace, etc). Based on your brainstormed thoughts, determine what next steps you need to take (i.e. Do you need to recruit an army? Should someone make a public statement on a particular topic? etc.)
4. After brainstorming, create a final Plan of Action – a list of **five major steps** (detailed and specific) that need to be taken as soon as possible.
5. Be prepared to present your ideas to your fellow delegates (classmates).

Exploring the Declaration of Independence by Creating a Modern Translation

The Declaration of Independence is one of our nation’s founding documents. However, because it was written so long ago (1776), it can be difficult to understand. In order to understand what happens throughout US history, we must take this document apart and grapple with its ideas.

Your assignment is to translate this document into language and a presentation that makes more sense in modern times. In your group, re-create the Declaration in a creative format, making its content, purpose, themes, etc. easily understandable in today’s world.

Step 1: Go through the document and, using each other’s brains, your textbook, dictionaries, and any other resources in the room (other than the teacher), make sure you understand what it says and why it is setting forth such ideas. Take notes.

Step 2: Think about what information, concepts, themes, etc. from the Declaration of Independence are most important to retell in your translation. Based on this, begin to brainstorm what format you would like your modern translation to take. What form will best convey your message? Will it be...

- a song or rap?
- a short, dramatic play/skit, perhaps in a particular style (i.e., soap opera, TV crime drama, musical theatre, etc.)
- a poem?
- a commercial?
- a cartoon?
- a breakup letter?
- Think outside the box!

Step 3: Start drafting your modern translation. Check to see that your work fits the rubric below.

Step 4: Edit, practice, and put the finishing touches on your work. You will be presenting these translations to the class.

Habits of Work	Habits of Mind	Communication Skills	Knowledge
<p><i>Your translation shows that you...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use in-class time effectively • persist in task, even when it’s difficult • treat team members with respect • demonstrate high standards of craftsmanship 	<p><i>Your translation shows that you...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate awareness of contrasting points of view • look for connections over time • consider what is important information 	<p><i>Your translation shows that you ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand through reading • comprehend difficult material • convey information clearly • speak clearly • use appropriate language 	<p><i>Your translation shows that you...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand the essential ideas from the D of I (beginning, middle, and end) • provide an in-depth modern comparison

Exceeds Standards – 5
Work - 1

Meets Standards – 4

Advancing Towards Standard – 3

Needs Additional

GROUP MEMBERS: _____

SCORE: _____ /20

Seminar on the Declaration of Independence

Your classroom should be arranged in a large circle when students enter. Instruct students to take out their Declaration of Independence text and self-created discussion questions, and go over the expectations of the seminar. (Socratic Seminar format and expectations can be found throughout the Internet.) Conduct the seminar, allotting for at least 45 minutes.

Opening Question:

- After reading the Declaration of Independence, what word or phrase would you use to describe Thomas Jefferson?

Possible Follow Up Questions:

- Read the 1st sentence of paragraph 2. What do you think Thomas Jefferson meant by “all men are created equal?”
- Jefferson states that all men have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” ...that these rights are “self evident.” Do you agree with this today? Does everyone have the same opportunities?
- After the Declaration was written and word of it spread to the Continental troops, how do you think it affected the Patriot soldiers and the war?
- How would you have felt hearing this document if you were enslaved or African American?
- According the passage “governments are instituted...”, who has the power in the government? Compare and contrast the truth of this statement in regards to 1776 and today.
- Read the passage, “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” What is your opinion of this? What could be dangerous about this? What examples throughout history can you note when this has happened?
- If Thomas Jefferson and the signers of the Declaration of Independence were here today, what would they think of our society and its citizens? What would they say regarding our level of engagement in government?
- Why is the Declaration of Independence relevant to us today?

Closing Question(s):

- After our discussion, has your opinion of Thomas Jefferson changed?
- What are you left thinking about the Declaration of Independence? What is your final opinion of this document?

Optional Homework:

After completing the seminar, explain to students that before the Declaration of Independence was issued, North Carolina created several documents of the same spirit.

- **Mecklenburg Resolves:** Created by Mecklenburg colonists in North Carolina and stated British laws were no longer in effect; the resolves provided for the creation of an independent local government to manage Mecklenburg County.
- **The Halifax Resolves:** The first call for independence, this document was created by Patriots in Halifax, NC on April 12, 1776; the Resolves recommended that NC and other colonies declare independence; these very resolves were read and discussed by the representatives at the Continental Congress, who issued the Declaration of Independence not long after.

For homework, have students write their own “Declaration of Independence,” which details their values and ways they will be independent and successful throughout life. Students should complete the prompt, “I hold these truths to be self-evident...” Allow students time to share their work the following day of class.