

The Declaration of Independence

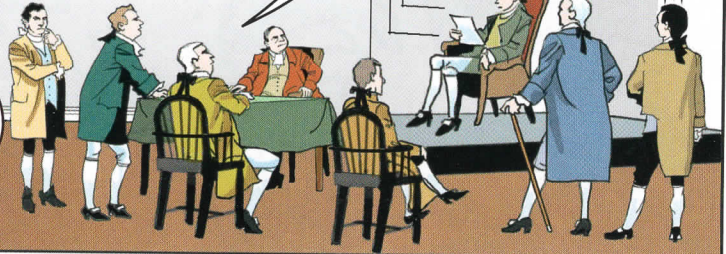


Six long months passed between *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence. During that time, while Congress debated and armies clashed, Americans moved ever closer to a final break with Britain. When the right moment came, they were ready.

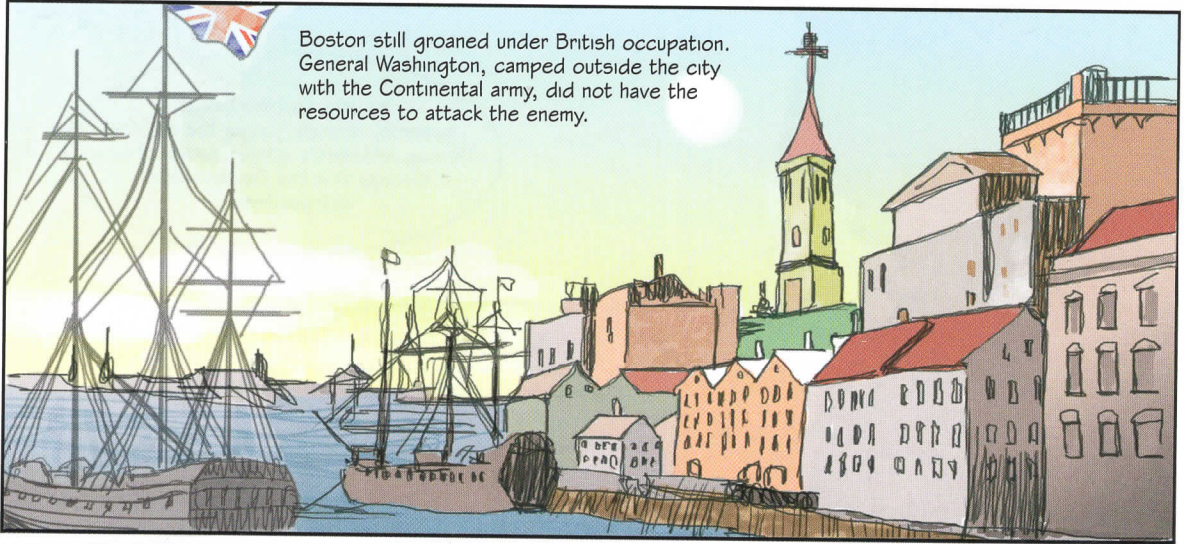
In winter 1775-76, events propelled the Second Continental Congress toward a decision, especially when colonists discovered that Parliament had blockaded all American trade and was attempting to confiscate American ships.

IT IS TRYING TO DESTROY OUR ECONOMY!

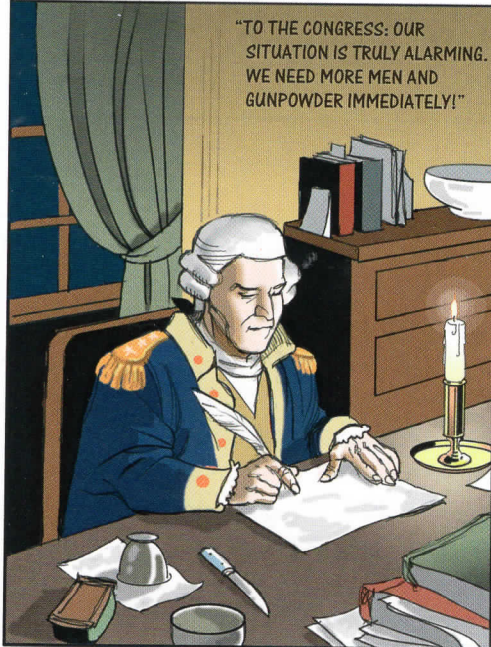
PARLIAMENT ITSELF IS PUSHING US TO INDEPENDENCE.



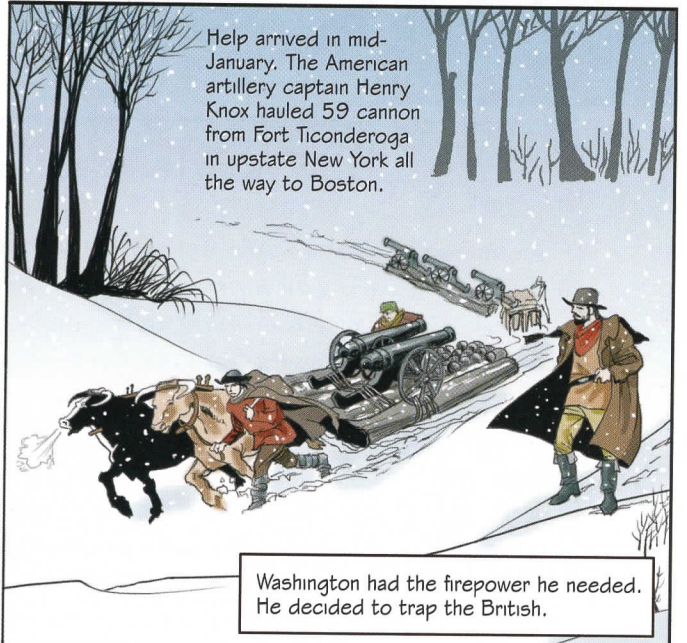
Boston still groaned under British occupation. General Washington, camped outside the city with the Continental army, did not have the resources to attack the enemy.



"TO THE CONGRESS: OUR SITUATION IS TRULY ALARMING. WE NEED MORE MEN AND GUNPOWDER IMMEDIATELY!"



Help arrived in mid-January. The American artillery captain Henry Knox hauled 59 cannon from Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York all the way to Boston.



Washington had the firepower he needed. He decided to trap the British.

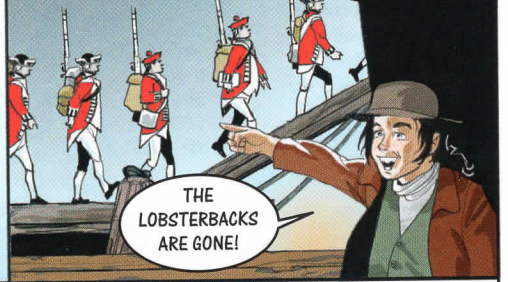
On March 4, Americans worked all night to place the artillery in makeshift fortifications on hills above the city of Boston and its harbor. When the British woke up the next morning, they saw rows of big guns pointing straight down at them.



GOOD GOD, THESE FELLOWS HAVE DONE MORE WORK IN ONE NIGHT THAN MY ARMY WOULD DO IN THREE MONTHS.

The British general William Howe ordered an attack, but it was halted by a snowstorm.

Instead, he loaded his army and American loyalists onto 120 British ships and sailed out of Boston Harbor.

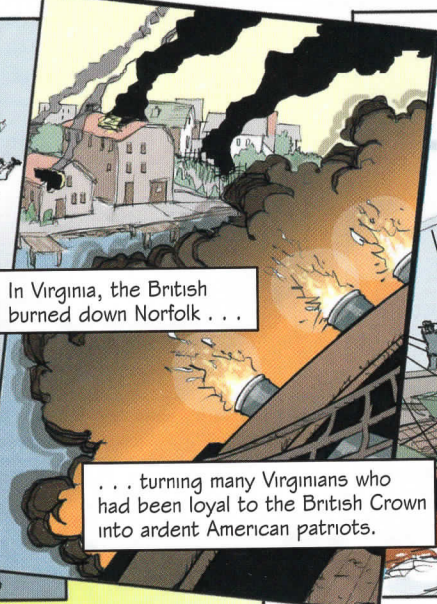


THE LOBSTERBACKS ARE GONE!

Meanwhile, Americans were losing a brutal campaign against the British in Canada.

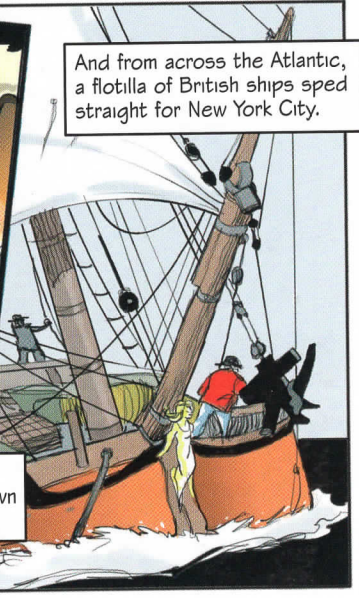


In Virginia, the British burned down Norfolk . . .

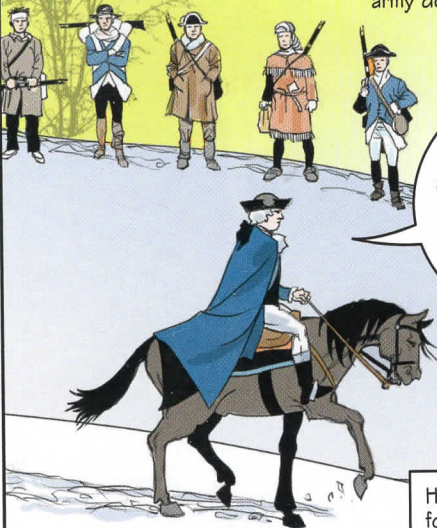


. . . turning many Virginians who had been loyal to the British Crown into ardent American patriots.

And from across the Atlantic, a flotilla of British ships sped straight for New York City.



Washington marched his ragtag army down to New York.



THE GREAT CAUSE WE ARE ENGAGED IN WILL PROTECT LIFE, LIBERTY, AND PROPERTY FROM THE RAVAGES OF A BRUTAL, SAVAGE ENEMY. OUR TOWNS ARE REDUCED TO ASHES, OUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN THREATENED.

He prepared them for mortal combat.

Most unsettling was the rumor that the king had hired 20,000 German mercenaries--Hessians--to fight against his own American subjects!



Spring 1776. The Continental Congress told each colony to write a new constitution to replace its royal charter. In assemblies and town meetings, Americans started to vote for independence. They sent the results to their delegates in the Congress.



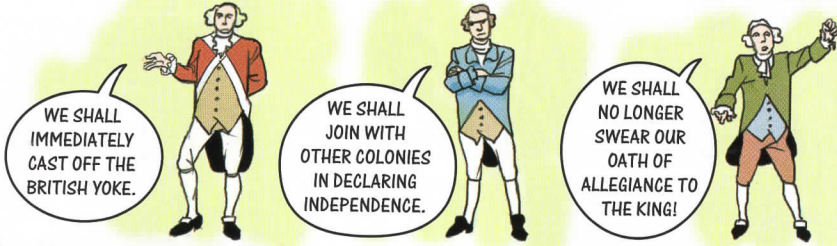
VIRGINIA



NORTH CAROLINA



RHODE ISLAND



WE SHALL IMMEDIATELY CAST OFF THE BRITISH YOKE.

WE SHALL JOIN WITH OTHER COLONIES IN DECLARING INDEPENDENCE.

WE SHALL NO LONGER SWEAR OUR OATH OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE KING!

Massachusetts delegate John Adams, who led the independence movement in Congress, wrote to a friend in great excitement.

EVERY POST AND EVERY DAY ROLLS IN UPON US, INDEPENDENCE LIKE A TORRENT.

Yet some delegates--especially in the Middle Colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania--were not ready for independence. Many of their citizens were Loyalists, businessmen, and government officials, reluctant or unwilling to make the final break from Britain and the king.

LET US NOT BE HASTY!



In the meantime, the American invasion of Canada was heading for disaster. While in New York City, Washington anxiously scanned the horizon for the enemy armada. The Congress debated what to do.

WE MUST SEE IF THE FRENCH COURT WILL ALLY WITH US AGAINST THE MIGHT OF THE BRITISH.

I PROPOSE A RESOLUTION!

State House, Pennsylvania, June 7. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia stood up in the Congress and presented a resolution approved by his legislature:

"These United Colonies are, and of rights 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."



A vigorous debate began. The Pennsylvania delegate John Dickinson, speaking for the moderates, argued fervently against the resolution.

SOME COLONIES HAVE NOT VOTED FOR INDEPENDENCE.

WE DON'T NEED TO BE INDEPENDENT TO WIN THE WAR.

RECONCILIATION WITH THE MOTHER COUNTRY WOULD BE BEST FOR THE THIRTEEN COLONIES.

John Adams spoke for the radicals.

DECLARING INDEPENDENCE JUST CONFIRMS WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED.

MOST AMERICANS WANT INDEPENDENCE!

Seven delegations supported the resolution for independence. Six--those of Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, and South Carolina--did not.

On June 10, Edward Rutledge of South Carolina moved to postpone a final vote for three weeks. The delay provided the Congress the time to write a formal declaration of independence. The Congress appointed a committee to accomplish this task:

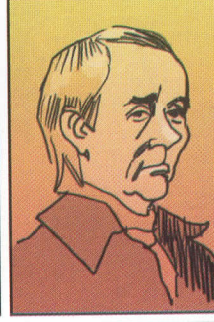
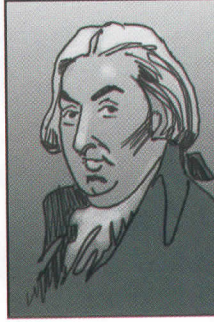
Benjamin Franklin
Pennsylvania
Writer, statesman,
and inventor

Thomas Jefferson
Virginia
Brilliant young lawyer

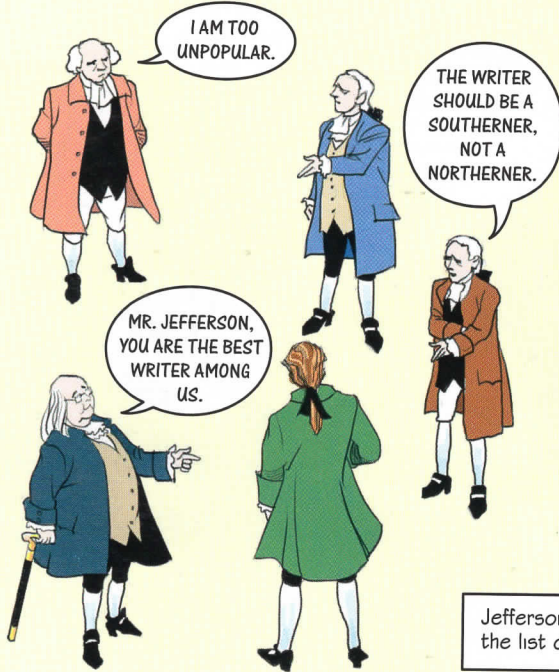
Robert Livingston
New York
Wealthy moderate

Roger Sherman
Connecticut
Plainspoken lawyer

John Adams
Massachusetts
Outspoken radical

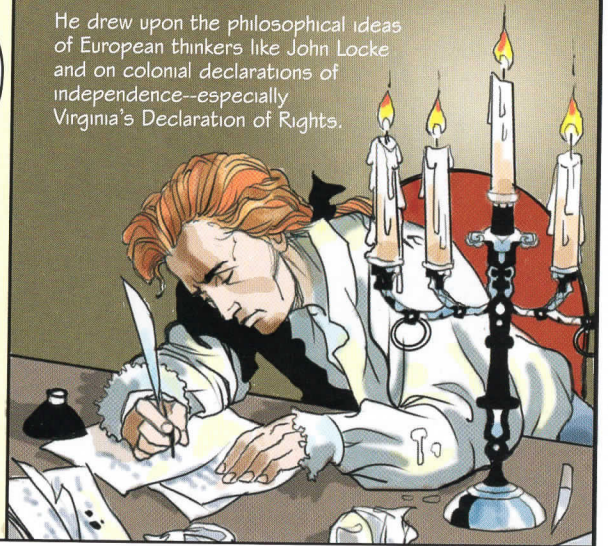


But who would write the first draft of the declaration?
The committee quickly came to a conclusion.



The committee agreed on the basic form and content of the document, then Jefferson drafted it. He wanted to express what most Americans were thinking—to capture the “tone and spirit” of “the American mind.”

He drew upon the philosophical ideas of European thinkers like John Locke and on colonial declarations of independence—especially Virginia’s Declaration of Rights.

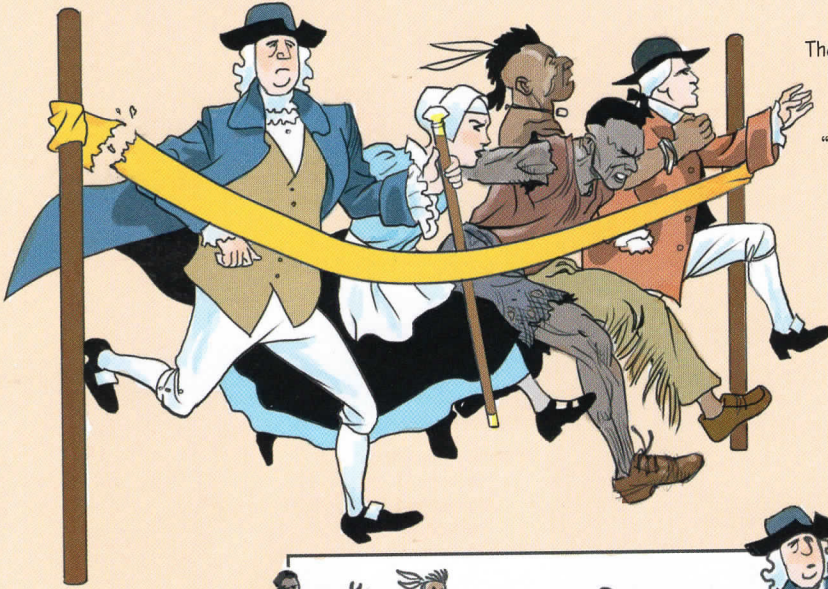


Jefferson divided the declaration into three sections: the introduction; the list of wrongs perpetrated by the king; and the conclusion.

The first paragraph of the introduction states that the time has come for Americans to cut their ties with Great Britain . . .

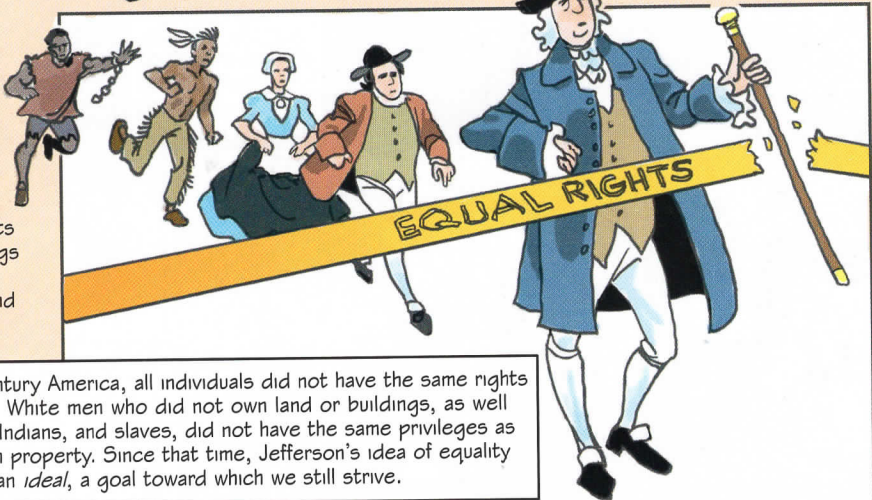


We hold these truths to be self-evident



The second paragraph of the declaration expresses the fundamental principles of the new nation: that "all men are created equal" and have natural rights that cannot be taken away from them.

By equality, Jefferson actually did not mean that everyone has the same abilities. Rather, he suggests that all human beings are born with the same God-given and legal rights.



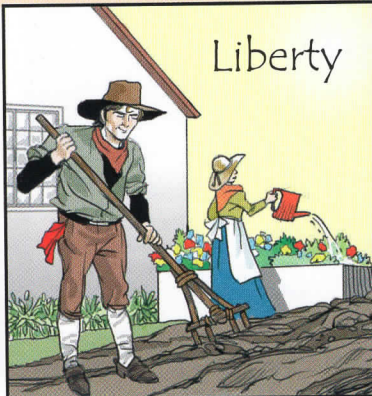
Yet in 18th-century America, all individuals did not have the same rights under the law. White men who did not own land or buildings, as well as all women, Indians, and slaves, did not have the same privileges as white men with property. Since that time, Jefferson's idea of equality has remained an *ideal*, a goal toward which we still strive.

The declaration defined natural human rights as including those of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" and said that governments are founded to protect these rights.

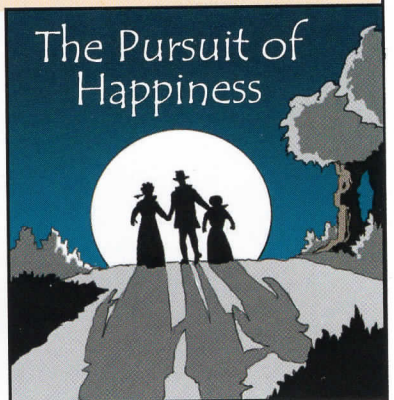
Life



Liberty



The Pursuit of Happiness



It further states that when government takes away their rights, people can reform their government . . .



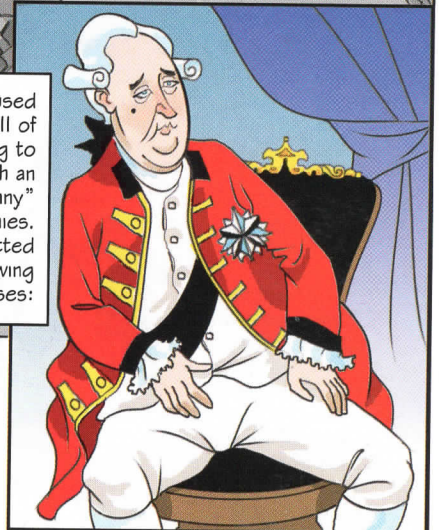
. . . or, when necessary, even overthrow it.



The longest section of the declaration lists 27 charges against the king.



Jefferson accused George III of attempting to establish an "absolute tyranny" over the colonies. He had committed the following offenses:



He violated the colonists' rights.



He did not allow the colonists to govern themselves.



He authorized violence against the colonists.

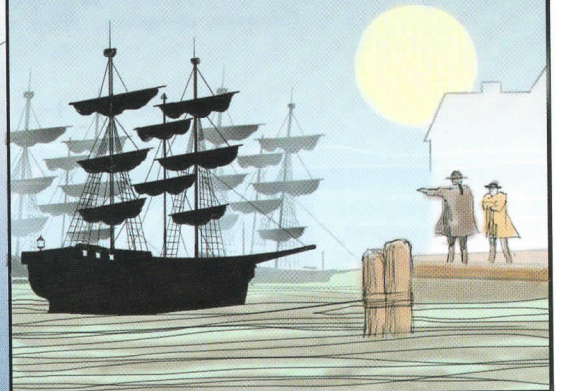


We therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in general congress, assembled, appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states.

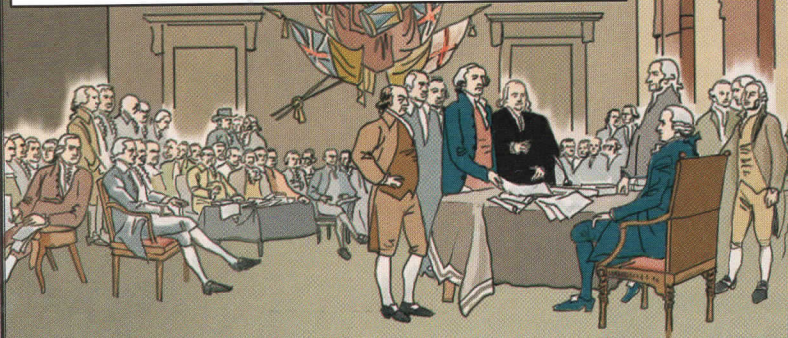
While Jefferson wrote, the British routed the American forces in Canada.



And a huge fleet of British warships sailed into New York Harbor.



On June 28, the committee formally presented the Declaration of Independence to the Second Continental Congress.



WE NEED THE PROTECTION OF GREAT BRITAIN!



On July 1, the delegates once again took up Richard Henry Lee's resolution of independence. And the debate went on.

The door banged open, and five new delegates from New Jersey marched in--and they voted for independence.

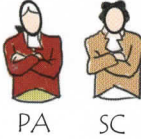
EITHER WE DECLARE AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE, OR WE REMAIN FOREVER SUBORDINATE!



Each colony cast one preliminary vote on the resolution. The final ballot would be taken the next day. At first, nine states voted yes.



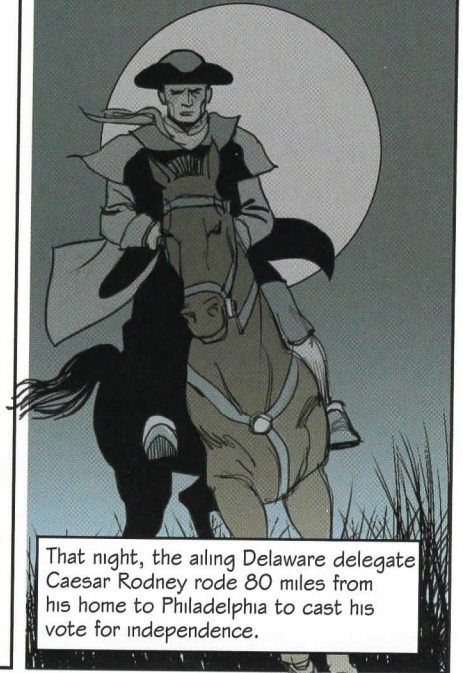
Two states voted no.



One state abstained.

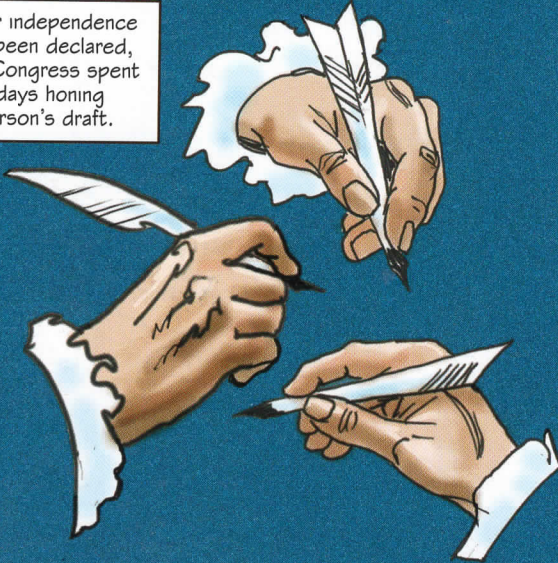


And one state was divided.



That night, the ailing Delaware delegate Caesar Rodney rode 80 miles from his home to Philadelphia to cast his vote for independence.

After independence had been declared, the Congress spent two days honing Jefferson's draft.



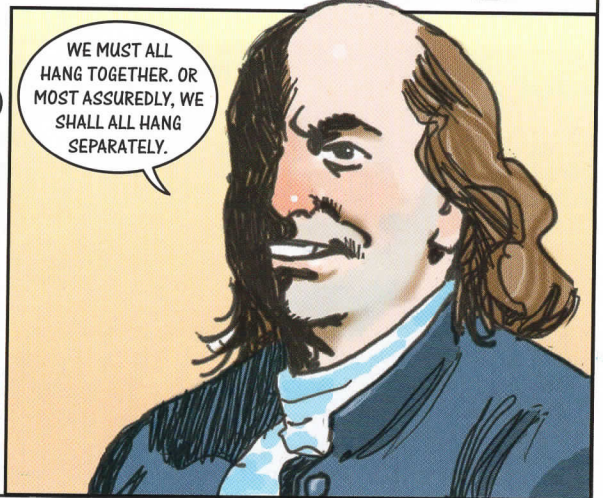
JULY 2, 1776. In the final vote, South Carolina and Delaware ratified independence. So did Pennsylvania. Only New York abstained--its delegates had never received instructions from their legislature. Two weeks later, they were able to vote for ratification.

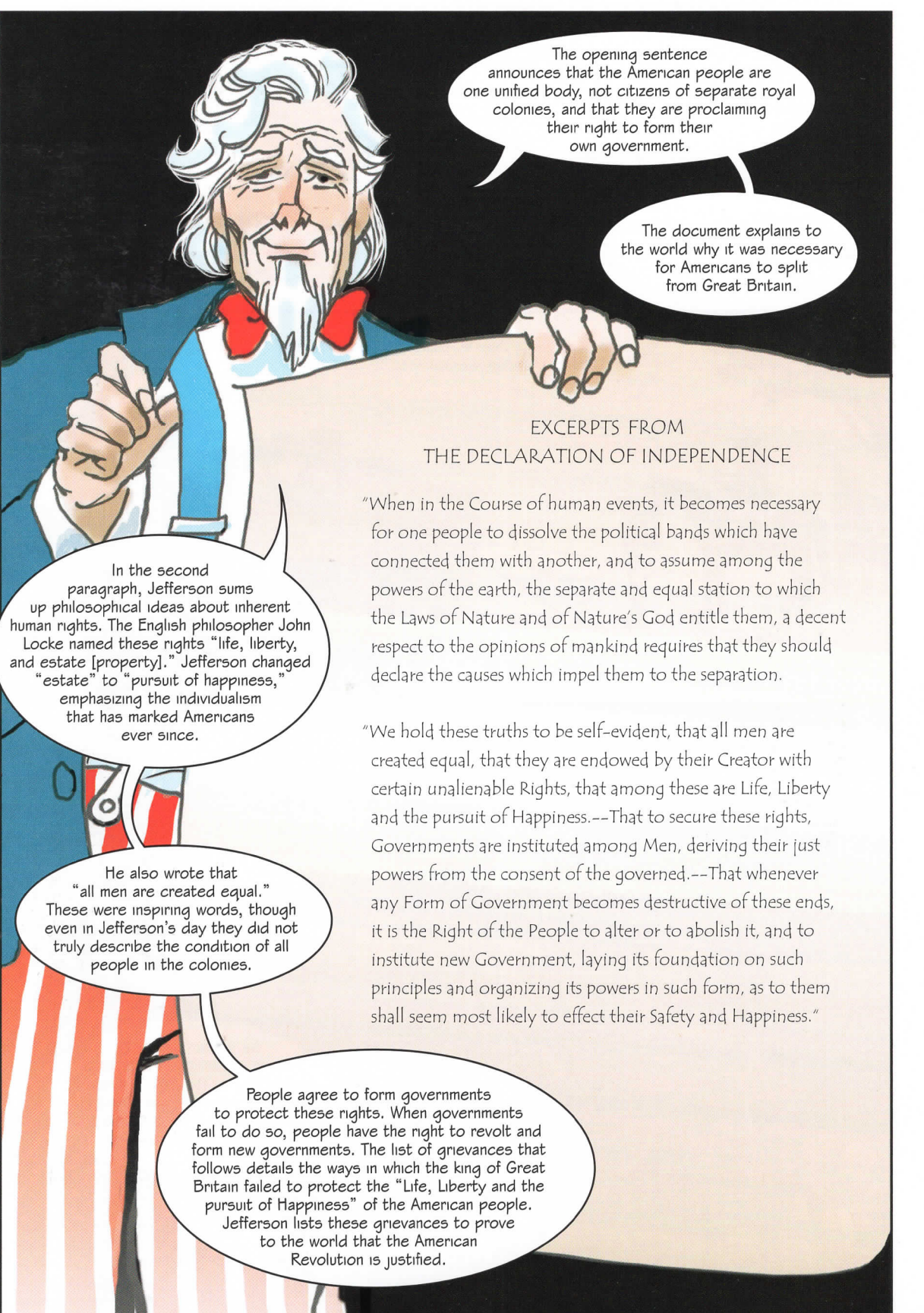


On July 4, the declaration was approved. All knew that this would be seen as an act of treason against Great Britain. They pledged to one another "our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

WE MUST BE UNANIMOUS.

WE MUST ALL HANG TOGETHER. OR MOST ASSUREDLY, WE SHALL ALL HANG SEPARATELY.





The opening sentence announces that the American people are one unified body, not citizens of separate royal colonies, and that they are proclaiming their right to form their own government.

The document explains to the world why it was necessary for Americans to split from Great Britain.

EXCERPTS FROM
THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

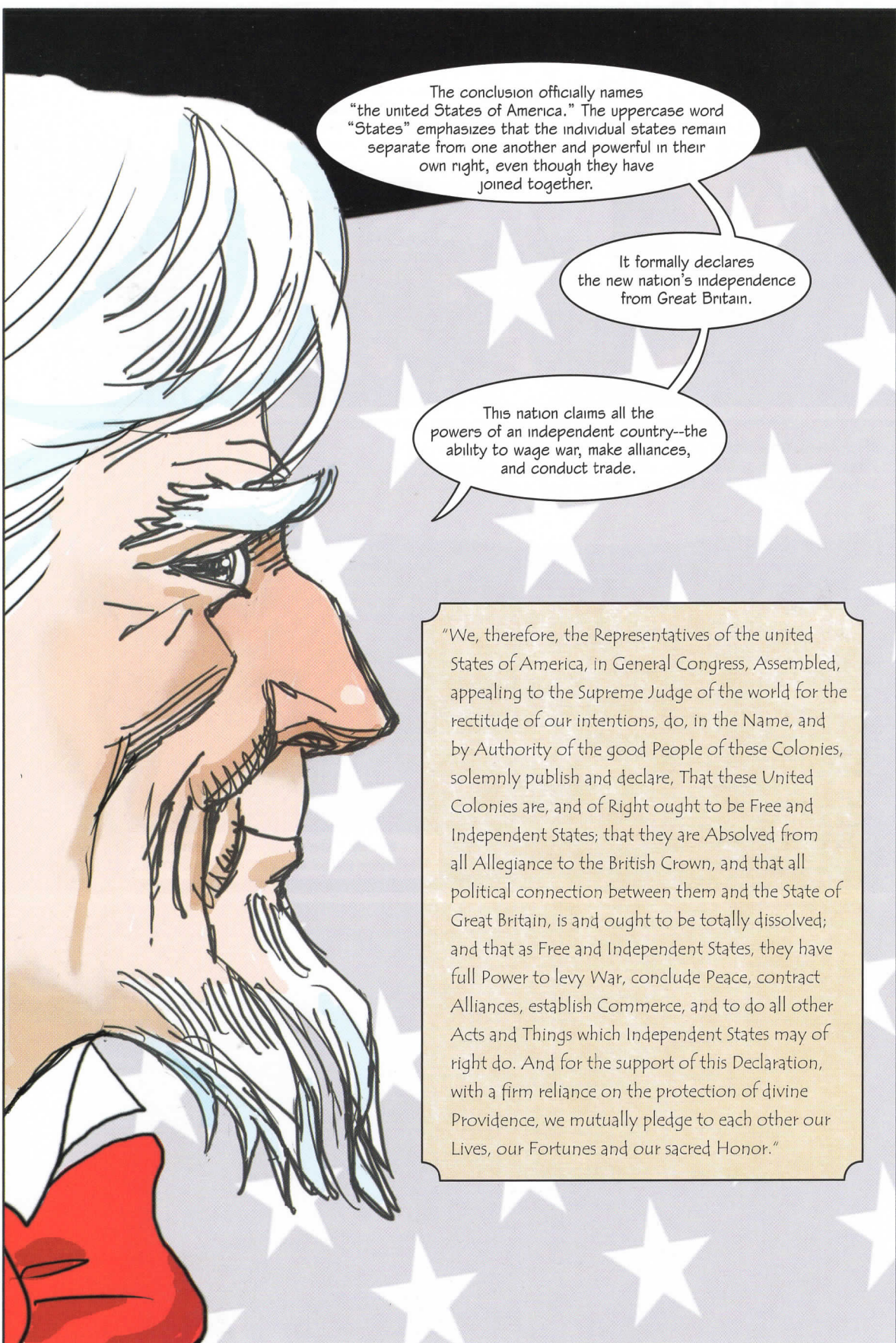
"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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

In the second paragraph, Jefferson sums up philosophical ideas about inherent human rights. The English philosopher John Locke named these rights "life, liberty, and estate [property]." Jefferson changed "estate" to "pursuit of happiness," emphasizing the individualism that has marked Americans ever since.

He also wrote that "all men are created equal." These were inspiring words, though even in Jefferson's day they did not truly describe the condition of all people in the colonies.

People agree to form governments to protect these rights. When governments fail to do so, people have the right to revolt and form new governments. The list of grievances that follows details the ways in which the king of Great Britain failed to protect the "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" of the American people. Jefferson lists these grievances to prove to the world that the American Revolution is justified.



The conclusion officially names "the united States of America." The uppercase word "States" emphasizes that the individual states remain separate from one another and powerful in their own right, even though they have joined together.

It formally declares the new nation's independence from Great Britain.

This nation claims all the powers of an independent country--the ability to wage war, make alliances, and conduct trade.

"We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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; 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. 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."