

THE FOUNDERS' INSPIRATION FOR A NATION

An ALEC States 250 Series



ABOUT THE AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE EXCHANGE COUNCIL

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INTRODUCTION: THE FOUNDERS' INSPIRATION FOR A NATION

"He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good."

By Katherine T. Bennett

The Declaration of Independence is one of the most famous documents in the world, and it is, at its core, a list of procedural violations by the British crown.

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of the most famous objection to a breach of process, we will highlight the Founder's grievances and how they sparked a revolution.

Before America declared its independence, the colonies operated their own governments. For the most part, these governments functioned like they do today, with a colonial assembly and a governor. The governor was the King's official representative in the colony. Early on, the governor had most of the power, but as time went on, the assemblies gained confidence and took more power away from the crown. These colonial governments evolved. What began as merely addressing immediate needs in the community became the fully functioning representative bodies. The process to establish laws started with a bill passing the Colonial Assembly before obtaining the King's official approval-called the King's Assent. The colonies used this process to push for more influence, even trying to get their representatives sent to Parliament.

"He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good."

Then came 1765.

Parliament passed the Stamp Act- an unpopular tax on paper goods meant to help offset costs of the Seven Years War. The colonists were furious. The King had "refused his Assent" to measures that would have given the colonist representation in Protests erupted. Some turned violent. The King, who had long ignored the self-governing colonies, finally took notice.

The King's representatives agreed to pardon all those who had broken British laws while protesting, if the Colonial Assemblies paid for the damages. The colonies agreed, prompting the Massachusetts Assembly to draw up a law formalizing the pardon agreement and calling it "wholesome and necessary for the public good."

However, the King refused his assent to the law. This blatant refusal of their autonomy sparked outrage in Massachusetts, leading to more protests and Parliament passing the Quartering Act, forcing the people of Massachusetts to allow occupation of their homes by British troops.

This moment became the first grievance the Founders listed in the Declaration of Independence.

Why? Because it cut to the heart of the matter—Government derives its power from the consent of the governed.

CONTINUAL ABUSES BY THE KING

These grievances weren't abstract complaints; they were procedural violations that struck at the heart of colonial self-rule.

By Katherine T. Bennett

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of the most famous objection to a breach of process, we continue our exploration of the Founders' grievances with the British Crown and how they sparked a revolution.

[The second, third, and fourth grievances](#) in the Declaration of Independence reflect escalating procedural violations by the British Crown that undermined colonial self-governance and fueled revolutionary fervor. These grievances document the King's [obstruction of local legislation, neglect of urgent laws, and coercive demands for representation surrender](#).

Grievance 2 reads, *"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."*

This second grievance speaks to a pattern of deliberate delay and neglect. Colonial assemblies often passed laws to address urgent local needs—such as taxation, infrastructure, or public safety—but governors appointed by the King were instructed to withhold approval unless the law received royal assent. In practice, this meant that even time-sensitive legislation was stalled indefinitely.

A prime example occurred in 1770, when the Massachusetts Assembly passed a law to tax government officers. The King ordered the governor to withhold assent, violating the colony's charter and effectively nullifying its legislative autonomy. This grievance echoes John Locke's principle that neglect is a valid reason for dissolving a government—a concept deeply embedded in Enlightenment thought and embraced by the Founders.

Grievance 3 reads, *"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."*

The third grievance reveals a more sinister tactic—conditional governance. The King refused to approve laws that would benefit growing colonial populations unless they agreed to give up representation. This practice was especially egregious in frontier regions, where settlers sought to establish local governments and courts to manage their affairs.

Representation was not a privilege—it was a right. And any attempt to strip it away was seen as tyrannical.

In Virginia and other colonies, requests to form new counties or districts were denied unless the inhabitants accepted diminished or no representation in the colonial legislature. The Founders viewed this as a direct assault on the principle of consent of the governed. Representation was not a privilege—it was a right. And any attempt to strip it away was seen as tyrannical.

Grievance 4 reads, *"He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures."*

The fourth grievance highlights a strategy of logistical sabotage. By relocating legislative sessions to remote or inconvenient locations, the Crown sought to disrupt colonial governance and pressure assemblies into submission. This tactic was used most famously in Massachusetts after the Boston Tea Party.

In 1774, Parliament passed the Massachusetts Government Act, which moved the colonial assembly from Boston to Salem, a town nearly 20 miles away and far from the colony's administrative center. The goal was clear: Make it more difficult for legislators to meet, access records, and coordinate resistance. The Founders saw this as an abuse of power designed to fatigue and frustrate elected officials into compliance.

These grievances weren't abstract complaints; they were procedural violations that struck at the heart of colonial self-rule. Each one documented a moment when the King chose control over consent, obstruction over cooperation. Together, they built the case for independence.

THE ROOTS OF SELF-GOVERNANCE

The Founding Fathers understood self-government is not merely about policy outcomes; it protects the mechanisms that allow free people to debate, dissent, and decide.

By Philip Billings

As we continue to commemorate America's 250th year of independence, we once again reflect on the Founders' list of grievances against the British Crown and how these violations sparked the American Revolution, one of the most consequential stands against procedural abuses in history.

Today, we focus on Grievances Five, Six, and Seven, each striking at the very foundation of republican governance: representation.

Grievance 5 reads, *"He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people."*

In 1768, the Massachusetts General Court issued the [Massachusetts Circular Letter](#), a bold protest against [taxation without representation](#) under the Townshend Acts. Governor Francis Bernard demanded that the House rescind it; [when they refused](#), he dissolved the assembly. In May 1769, the Virginia House of Burgesses asserted that only Virginians through their elected assembly could levy taxes and condemned the threat of transporting colonists to England for trial. The new governor, Lord Botetourt, responded by [dissolving the legislature](#).

North Carolina faced a similar fate. When its assembly refused to comply with royal instructions and challenged Parliament's authority over taxation, [the legislature was dissolved](#), sending the same unmistakable message that self-government existed only at the Crown's pleasure.

Grievance 6 exposes what made these dissolutions so dangerous: *"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 meantime, exposed to all the Dangers of Invasion from without, and convulsions within."*

In 1767, when the New York Assembly refused full compliance with the [Quartering Act](#), Parliament passed the [New York Restraining Act](#), suspending the Assembly's legislative powers until it complied. In 1774, the [Massachusetts Government Act](#) placed the colony under direct royal and military authority. The act transformed the elected council into an appointed body, sharply restricted town meetings, and drastically limited the operation of the elected House. Though not entirely abolishing elections, it effectively left Massachusetts without a functioning representative government.

As a result, colonists were increasingly deprived of lawful, representative self-government, even in times of crisis. The Founders understood that without representation, lawmaking authority "returned to the people" by necessity, not choice. The absence of functioning colonial legislatures helped to drive the creation of ad-hoc representative bodies, such as the [First Continental Congress](#). It was, in effect, governance by necessity when governance by consent had failed.

Grievance 7 reveals how the Crown attempted to stifle the growth of American society itself: *"He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose, obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands."*

By the mid-18th century, the American colonies were swelling with immigrants. Many were farmers, artisans, and dissenters from the state-church model of Europe, attracted by land, freedom of conscience, and a chance at self-rule. Yet, these settlers were a threat from Britain's perspective.

By the early 1770s, the Crown and Parliament began tightening control over the colonies, restricting naturalization laws and blocking western land grants. [The Royal Proclamation of 1763](#) drew a firm line along the Appalachians, forbidding settlement beyond it. Measures that might have helped settlers gain citizenship were denied, and opportunities to expand westward were restricted.

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These policies were not simply about managing borders; they were about asserting control. From the Crown's perspective, a growing population of independent, land-owning colonists posed a direct threat to imperial authority.

Taken together, Grievances five, six, and seven reveal a clear pattern: the Crown attempted to choke off self-government at its roots, namely representative assemblies, democratic elections, and the very population capable of sustaining them. When assemblies opposed royal overreach, they were dissolved. When people demanded representation, elections were denied, and when communities grew, laws were passed to halt migration and restrict land ownership.

The Founders recognized that this was not mismanagement; it was the systematic dismantling of the consent of the governed. Representation is the safeguard of liberty, and if the government rejects its obligation to represent, the people have a duty to replace it. Their response was bold and historic: when the Crown attempted to extinguish it, the American people did not just resist—they chose independence.

Yet, these grievances still carry lessons for today. The Founders understood that procedural abuses like dissolving legislatures, delaying elections, and obstructing participation pose as great a threat to liberty as unjust laws themselves. Self-government is not merely about policy outcomes but about protecting the mechanisms that allow free people to debate, dissent, and decide.

THE EROSION OF JUSTICE AND SELF-GOVERNANCE

The grievances outlined in the Declaration of Independence were not abstract complaints but direct responses to a pattern of imperial policies.

By Katherine T. Bennett, Philip Billings, Nino Marchese, Joshua Meyer, Zachary Federico

The grievances outlined in the Declaration of Independence were not abstract complaints but direct responses to a pattern of imperial policies that, in the eyes of the colonists, systematically dismantled their political autonomy and legal protections. Grievances eight through eleven reveal how deeply the colonists feared the erosion of justice, self-government, and personal security under British rule. Through judicial manipulation, expanded executive power, intrusive taxation, and the deployment of standing armies in peacetime, the Crown appeared to be constructing a system in which colonial rights existed only at the pleasure of the King. Examining these grievances together shows how the colonists came to believe that the British government was no longer merely mismanaging the empire—it was actively undermining the foundations of English liberty in America.

Grievance 8 reads, *“He has obstructed the Administration of Justice by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.”*

...colonists came to believe that the British government was no longer merely mismanaging the empire—it was actively undermining the foundations of English liberty in America.

By [withholding assent to laws](#) concerning the structure and independence of colonial courts, imperial authorities curtailed the assemblies' ability to shape and oversee their own judicial institutions. [The Massachusetts Government Act](#) of 1774, part of the [Intolerable Acts](#), intensified these concerns by fundamentally reshaping the Massachusetts Council. Previously, the Massachusetts Assembly elected the Governor's Council, which served as an advisory body to the governor. The Act [stripped the Assembly of this authority](#) and vested the power of appointment solely in the King. The newly appointed members, known as “mandamus councilors,” served at the King's pleasure, ensuring that key positions within the colonial government, including judicial offices, remained firmly aligned with the Crown.

Jury selection was likewise altered. Rather than being chosen by town meetings, jurors were instead selected by sheriffs appointed by the royal governor. This shift removed local communities from direct participation in the administration of justice and consolidated authority in officials answerable to the Crown. Coupled with the [Administration of Justice Act](#), which permitted royal officials accused of certain crimes to be tried outside Massachusetts, colonists increasingly feared that their traditional protections, including the right to trial by a local jury, were being systematically eroded.

Grievance 9 reads, *“He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.”*

Beginning with revenue measures such as the [Townshend Acts](#), Parliament created the financial mechanism that allowed the Crown to pay colonial judges directly rather than leaving their salaries under the control of elected assemblies. When the Crown announced in 1772 that it would begin funding the Massachusetts Superior Court judges from these revenues, colonists immediately recognized the constitutional danger: a judge whose salary and tenure depended on the King could not be expected to remain impartial in disputes involving royal authority. This shift removed a crucial check on executive power and threatened the independence of the courts.

By placing judges, and, increasingly, royal governors, on the Crown's payroll, the imperial government ensured that key officials no longer relied on the colonists for their offices or income. Colonial assemblies protested, arguing that a judiciary financially beholden to the King could not be trusted to safeguard local rights or administer justice fairly. Outrage over this erosion of judicial independence helped in the creation of the [Committees of Correspondence](#) in Massachusetts. To many colonists, the move signaled that lawful self-government was being replaced by a system of salaried obedience. A judge paid by the Crown was no longer a neutral arbiter but an instrument of imperial control.

Grievance 10 reads, *“He has erected a multitude of new Offices and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their Substance.”*

Every American student learns about the Boston Tea Party in grade school. But this event was the culmination of years of oppressive taxation from the royal government. Some of the most hated taxes were imposed in the Stamp Act in 1765. The Act taxed almost all printed materials in the colonies—and in a time before iPhones and email, it amounted to a tax on much of the Colonies’ commerce. Taxes were paid on newspapers, contracts, almanacs, liquor licenses, mortgages, marriage licenses, diplomas, even playing cards.

As, a result of boycotts and enforcement challenges, the Stamp Act was repealed in 1766, but just a year later, Parliament enacted the Townshend Acts. Perhaps the most important colonial taxes leading up to the revolution.

Grievance 11 reads, *“He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.”*

After Britain and France concluded the [Seven Years’ War](#) with the [Treaty of Paris](#) in 1763, imperial officials insisted that a permanent army in the American colonies was necessary both to deter any renewed French ambitions in North America and to contain violent conflicts between colonists and Native nations along the frontier. While many colonists initially accepted the protective value of British forces, by the late 1760s and early 1770s they had come to view the army less as a defensive necessity and more as an instrument for enforcing Parliament’s revenue measures.

The deployment of British troops into settled towns, most notably [Boston in 1768](#), raised colonial suspicions that the army’s primary purpose was to enforce parliamentary taxation rather than to defend the colonies from external threats. Tensions culminated in 1770 when British troops fired into a crowd, killing five civilians in an incident that became known as the [Boston Massacre](#). A few years later, the [Quartering Act of 1774](#), enacted as part of the [Coercive Acts](#), expanded the authority of royal governors to secure housing for troops within the colonies when adequate barracks were unavailable. What British officials regarded as a lawful exercise of imperial authority, many colonists viewed as a direct encroachment on their self-governance.

CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT IN MILITARY POWER

Today, civilian control over the military is firmly established in our constitutional system.

By Zachary Federico, Karla Jones, Katherine T. Bennett

The colonists believed King George III was weakening the important idea that the military should remain under civilian authority. They viewed civilian control of the military as an essential protection for their rights and freedoms. These next grievances in the Declaration of Independence address the relationship between the military and government.

Grievance 12 reads, *“He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.”*

Civilian control over the military is a concept deeply embedded in classical republican political thought, where it serves as a safeguard against the tyranny historically associated with standing armies. While England embraced this philosophy internally by placing the king and Parliament over the British military, colonists believed the king violated it in the colonies by [appointing](#) General Thomas Gage as Massachusetts governor. This appointment made Gage simultaneously the British commanding general for North America and the king’s chief civil authority in Massachusetts.

Today, civilian control over the military is firmly established in our constitutional system. The people’s representatives in Congress retain the power to declare war, fund the military, and create legal rules that govern the military’s use. At the same time, the President serves as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, which ensures that the head of the military is politically accountable. This division of authority provides checks and balances while ensuring military subordination to civil authority.

Grievance 13 reads, *“He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation.”*

The colonists bristled at their laws being superseded by a “foreign” parliament an ocean away, with their frustration evident in this passage.

These new Americans constructively channeled their outrage into developing a governing framework intended to be impervious to tyranny. The U.S. Constitution gives the federal government only limited and enumerated powers and assigns all other authority to the states and localities, effectively devolving much power to government closest to the governed. Our Founders created a federal republic with federalism serving as a bulwark against federal overreach. In *Bond v. United States*, the Supreme Court observed that [“...federalism secures to citizens the liberties that derive from the diffusion of sovereign power.”](#) Federalism was designed to prevent “a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution” from subjecting Americans to “unacknowledged” laws – including those promulgated by our own national government.

...civilian control over the military is firmly established in our constitutional system.

Grievance 14 reads, *“For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us.”*

The practice of quartering soldiers dates back to the [Roman Republic](#), when territorial governors imposed it on local populations as both a tool of oppression and a source of revenue. This practice emerged in the American colonies when the British Parliament passed the [Quartering Act of 1765](#) and required American colonists to provide housing, food, and supplies for British troops stationed in their towns. Since tensions were already high between the colonists and the British troops, the colonists interpreted this law as requiring them to pay for their own oppression.

After the American Revolution, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire [adopted laws](#) to restrict quartering. On the federal side, the original Constitution draft did not include any similar provisions, so Virginia, New York, and North Carolina [proposed amendments](#) to prohibit involuntary peacetime quartering and restrict wartime quartering to specified limits. This formed the basis of the Third Amendment: “No Soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.”

Grievance 15 reads, *“For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.”*

As tensions rose in the colonies, violence would occasionally break out between colonists and British troops. In 1768, for example, British soldiers killed two residents of Annapolis, Maryland. Despite overwhelming evidence against them, the soldiers were [acquitted](#) when the case went to trial. Six years later, Parliament passed the [Administration of Justice Act](#). The law required British soldiers accused of murder to be tried in Britain rather than in the colony where the crime occurred.

These perceived injustices led the Constitution’s Framers to include safeguards, ensuring fair criminal trials. Article III, Section 2 states: “The Trial of all Crimes, except in Cases of Impeachment, shall be by Jury; and such Trial shall be held in the State where the said Crimes shall have been committed; but when not committed within any State, the Trial shall be at such Place or Places as the Congress may by Law have directed.” This idea is also found in the Sixth Amendment: “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defense.”

These experiences shaped the American commitment to keeping the armed forces under clear civilian leadership. The Constitution gives Congress, as the people’s representative body, the power to raise and regulate the military, while the President, an elected civilian, serves as Commander in Chief. Together, these arrangements keep the military accountable to democratic institutions and protect citizens from the kinds of abuses the colonists feared.

TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

The Founders understood that when a government claims unchecked authority over trade, taxation, and the administration of justice, it endangers not only individual liberties but the very structure of self-government.

By Alan Jernigan, Joshua Meyer, Nino Marchese, Karla Jones, Philip Billings

As tensions escalated in the years leading up to the American Revolution, colonial leaders increasingly came to view their conflicts with British rule not as a series of isolated disputes, but as a sustained pattern of constitutional overreach. What began as disagreements over taxation and imperial administration evolved into something far more consequential: a breakdown in the legal and institutional safeguards that had long defined the rights of English subjects. The Crown's actions—ranging from interfering with colonial courts to reshaping systems of justice and governance—signaled a government willing to subordinate established protections to imperial control.

Grievance 16 reads, *“For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world.”*

In the 1770s, the British Empire sought to establish itself as the colonies' exclusive trading partner. The Boston Tea Party spurred the British to impose the Boston Port Act of 1774, closing the Port of Boston and demanding repayment for the tea dumped into the harbor during the protest. The following year, the British escalated tensions with the passage of the Prohibitory Act, which banned colonial trade with any nation except Great Britain and designated American ships as British enemies. Inconsistent with ALEC guiding principles, this act forced the colonies into exclusive trading dependence with Great Britain, depriving them of the economic growth potential that international trade created then and now.

King George III knew that denying the colonies access to trade would ultimately weaken them; however, he underestimated American resolve. The founding fathers regarded this restriction as just another reason to sever ties with the Crown and establish their own trade agreements, which to this day serve as a key marker of a sovereign government's power and as a non-military strategic footprint around the world. With 95% of the world's consumers living beyond our borders, international trade creates millions of American jobs and boosts states' economic competitiveness.

Grievance 17 reads, *“For imposing taxes on us without our consent.”*

When the Crown's colonial government imposed taxes without consent, it became destructive of those property rights, impelling the colonists to its dissolution.

It is one of the critical powers of government that it may deprive people of their property, the most regular mechanism of which is taxation. The tax burden on the colonists was light, but the manner in which it was imposed offended the inviolability of private property. The American colonists saw an increasing range of taxes imposed to cover government expenses and infringements on their property over which they had no say.

If, without consent, the Crown could tax Americans, then what prevented any of a colonist's property from confiscation? Governments are instituted to protect the property rights of their citizens. When the Crown's colonial government imposed taxes without consent, it became destructive of those property rights, impelling the colonists to its dissolution.

Grievance 18 reads, *“For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury.”*

Trial by jury, a concept rooted in the 1215 Magna Carta, was long considered a fundamental right of English subjects—including American colonists—guaranteeing that freemen could be punished only by the lawful judgment of their peers. However, a series of British policies in the 1760s and 1770s either limited or eliminated colonial juries, particularly in cases involving trade and imperial enforcement. After the Sugar Act (1764) and Stamp Act (1765), England expanded vice-admiralty courts to try smuggling

cases without juries. Further undermining colonial rights, the Administration of Justice Act (part of the Coercive (Intolerable) Acts of 1774) allowed accused royal officials to be tried outside the colonies, bypassing local juries. Colonists believed these measures undermined impartial justice, subjected them to politically motivated prosecutions (particularly before judges dependent on the Crown for their salaries), and were systematically eroding their traditional rights as Englishmen, making the deprivation of jury trials a core grievance of the Continental Congress.

Grievance 19 reads, “For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offenses.”

Grievance 19 referenced the Massachusetts Government Act, one of the Intolerable Acts, also known as the Coercive Acts, which were a series of four British laws adopted in 1774 to punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party. This statute held that anyone accused of committing crimes against those administering the British law in the colony could be sent to another colony or to England to stand trial. The King’s Act stripped Massachusetts law protections from the colony’s citizens. Years later, America’s Constitutional Framers, recognizing the danger inherent in being subject to a foreign judicial system that fails to uphold individual rights, included due process provisions in the U.S. Constitution’s Fifth Amendment, and the concept was strengthened in the mid-1800s with the 14th Amendment.

Our Founding Fathers’ alarm over ceding judicial authority was prescient. In 2020, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) implemented a “national security” law – an updated Massachusetts Government Act with “Chinese Characteristics” – subjecting Hong Kongers to the PRC legal system even though the city was to administer its judicial system until 2047 under the One Country Two Systems framework negotiated with the UK at the 1997 handover of Hong Kong. China’s national security law effectively erased the last vestiges of Hong Kong’s autonomy, as detailed in the ALEC China Implements National Security Law that Threatens to Violate Hong Kong’s Sovereignty.

Together, Grievances 16 through 19 reveal how deeply the Crown’s policies threatened the economic autonomy, property rights, and legal protections that form the backbone of a free society. The Founders understood that when a government claims unchecked authority over trade, taxation, and the administration of justice, it endangers not only individual liberties but the very structure of self-government. Their insistence on resisting these abuses laid the groundwork for the constitutional safeguards Americans continue to rely on today.

A RIGHT TO SELF-GOVERNANCE

Independence appeared not as rebellion but as the necessary step to preserve self government, constitutional order, and the rights colonists believed were theirs by birth and by law.

By Karla Jones, Philip Billings

Grievances 20 through 23 reveal a central theme in the Declaration of Independence: the colonists' belief that Great Britain had systematically dismantled their political, legal, and constitutional foundations. Each grievance highlights a different facet of this erosion—from the imposition of foreign legal systems in neighboring territories and the revocation of colonial charters to the suspension of representative legislatures, as well as the King's decision to wage open war against his own subjects.

Together, these actions convinced the colonists that the British government no longer viewed them as partners in a shared constitutional order but as a population to be controlled, coerced, or cast aside.

Grievance 20 reads, *“For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies.”*

Grievance 20 refers to the [Quebec Act of 1774](#), which the colonists viewed as an assault on their governing structures and future westward expansion. After France's defeat and subsequent loss of Quebec in the [Seven Years' War](#), England issued the “[Royal Proclamation of 1763](#),” meant to Anglicize Quebec's French-Canadian population and encourage more British to settle there. The Proclamation failed to meet either of these objectives, leading to the Quebec Act, which allowed French-Canadians to maintain a French civilian government and cultural practices, including Catholicism.

The potential replacement of British with French institutional norms is what the Founding Fathers meant by “establishing therein an Arbitrary government”. A distrust of the Catholic Church fueled some of these concerns; indeed, only one of the signers, Charles Carroll of Maryland, was Catholic. And while the Thirteen Colonies were not directly subject to the Quebec Act, they worried that it was only a matter of time before they would be. America's Founders were also worried about the parts of the Act that expanded the boundaries of Quebec westward, which could inhibit colonial settlement.

Grievance 21 reads, *“For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments.”*

Grievance 21 is yet another British outrage spawned by the aptly named [Intolerable Acts](#) – a series of four Acts invoked by Parliament that transferred power from the colonies to Great Britain, mainly to punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party, although the fourth Act applied to all the colonies. This grievance references the second “Intolerable,” the [Massachusetts Government Act](#), which revoked the Massachusetts Bay colony's charter, ceding power to appoint colonial government officials such as judges, attorneys general, justices of the peace, and sheriffs to the royal governor. Previously, the colony's council, representatives elected annually, made these selections. With the adoption of the Massachusetts Government Act, both the council and the officials would be appointed by the British and owe allegiance to the Crown rather than to the colonists.

To make matters worse, General Thomas Gage held the position of governor, effectively placing Massachusetts Bay under martial law. The stated purpose of the Massachusetts Act was “...the maintenance and just subordination to and conformity with, the laws of Great Britain...” because Massachusetts Bay “...hath, by repeated experience, been found to be extremely ill adapted to the plan of government...”

This is a curious accusation considering that just a few years later, many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence would help to draft the U.S. Constitution, a document that is still emulated and regarded by many as the gold standard of good governance. Undoubtedly, Great Britain's government overreach informed the Constitutional Framers' inclusion of so many safeguards to preserve individual freedom, as well as their incorporation of federalism to prevent the centralization of power at the national level.

Grievance 22 reads, *“For suspending our Legislatures and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.”*

Grievance 22 refers to the authority royal governors had to suspend colonial legislatures and replace colonial law with royal proclamations. [The Declaratory Act of 1766](#) empowered the Parliament to pass laws to which the colonists would be subject, and the British had suspended colonial assemblies, most notably in New York, when the legislature refused to support the Quartering Act of 1765.

The colonists viewed the Quebec Act of 1774 as establishing a system of government in French Canada that did not include provisions for legislatures, with mounting concern, fearing that a similar measure would be in their future. America’s Founders understood the importance of laws promulgated by legislative assemblies whose representatives were elected by the people governed.

Undoubtedly, Great Britain’s assault on colonial legislatures spurred the Constitutional Framers to ensure that the prominence of the legislative branch – Article 1 – would be unassailable when drafting the U.S. Constitution.

Grievance 23 reads, *“He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.”*

Grievance 23 reflects the moment when many colonists concluded that King George III had forfeited his role as their lawful ruler. When the King informed Parliament in early 1775 that the colonies were in a state of [“open and avowed rebellion.”](#) many colonists interpreted this as meaning they were no longer entitled to the traditional protections owed to British subjects.

This shift was soon codified in the [Prohibitory Act](#), which blockaded American ports, authorized the seizure of colonial ships, and was widely understood by colonists as placing the colonies outside the normal protections of the British constitutional order. To American readers, this was not an ordinary punishment—it was a declaration that the Crown no longer recognized them as part of the political community.

The grievance also highlights the King’s decision to wage war by deploying British troops, [hiring Hessian mercenaries](#), and sanctioning royal governors’ efforts to enlist Native nations against the colonists. These actions convinced many Americans that the King had not merely misruled but had abandoned governance altogether, replacing civil authority with military force.

By sending armies to America and treating the colonists as foreign enemies, George III had, in their view, “abdicated government” by renouncing the obligations of a lawful sovereign. In the logic of the Declaration, once the King dissolved this bond, the colonists were released from their allegiance, making independence not only justified but necessary.

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Grievances 20 through 23 illustrate why the Founders believed the imperial relationship had become irreparably broken. The Quebec Act threatened to replace English legal traditions with arbitrary rule; the Intolerable Acts stripped colonies of their charters and self-governing institutions; royal governors suspended legislatures at will; and King George III ultimately renounced his obligations by declaring the colonists outside his protection and making war upon them. These escalating abuses persuaded Americans that the Crown had abandoned lawful governance and violated the very principles on which British liberty rested. In this way, independence appeared not as rebellion but as the necessary step to preserve self-government, constitutional order, and the rights colonists believed were theirs by birth and by law.

THE BATTLE LINES

The Declaration of Independence is replete with immutable, universal truths – life, liberty, representative government, and the rule of law.

By Zachary Federico, Karla Jones, Katherine T. Bennett

The final four grievances that inspired the Founding Fathers to break away from England centered largely on military transgressions. The signatories to the Declaration spoke against the attack facing the colonists on their own land and on the high seas.

Grievance 24 reads, *“He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.”*

As tensions rose between the colonists and the British, a series of skirmishes broke out throughout the colonies. The first major battle occurred on June 17th, 1775. Known today as [The Battle of Bunker Hill](#), this two-hour conflict resulted in over 1,000 British casualties, 450 colonial casualties, and the destruction of the town of Charlestown, Massachusetts.

On October 18th, 1775, British Captain Henry Mowat was ordered to retaliate against the colonists for raids against British ships. His [order](#) from Vice Admiral Samuel Graves was to “lay waste burn and destroy such Sea Port towns as are accessible to His Majesty’s ships.” Mowat chose Falmouth, which is now Portland, Maine, as his first target. After warning the town, leading the colonists to evacuate, Mowat’s fleet of six ships fired incendiary cannonballs, destroying over 400 buildings and leaving over 1,000 colonists without homes.

A few months later, John Murray, the last royal governor of Virginia, was defeated at the [Battle of Great Bridge](#) and forced to retreat to British ships off the coast of Norfolk. On January 1st, 1776, the British fleet [fired](#) upon the Norfolk waterfront, and colonial troops were secretly encouraged by their commanders to set fire to the city to raise support for the revolution. The burning destroyed two-thirds of the city and became a major driver in building support for the revolutionary cause.

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Grievance 25 reads, *“He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.”*

During the Revolutionary War, the British Empire was simultaneously fighting wars in Europe, India, and the Caribbean. This stretched the British military and led the king to hire about [30,000](#) German troops to fight the Americans. These mercenaries, also called “Hessians,” were known for their [discipline and ferocity](#), which often involved plundering civilian property.

Grievance 26 reads, *“He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.”*

In December 1775, the British Parliament passed the [Prohibitory Act](#), which authorized the Royal Navy to seize colonial ships and impress colonial sailors to serve in the Royal Navy. Most of these colonial sailors joined the Sons of Liberty specifically to [fight](#) the Royal Navy’s harassment, as the act required them to fight in the navy they despised against the cause they supported. Impressment was not allowed under the ordinary rules of war and was seen as a cruelty by the colonists.

Grievance 27 reads, *“He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.”*

Grievance 27 is actually two separate grievances. The first on “domestic insurrections” opposes Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, which offered freedom to the colonies’ runaway slaves and indentured servants who joined the British fight against American rebels. The second critique is of England’s recruitment of “the inhabitants of our frontiers,” otherwise known as Native Americans, as allies against the colonists.

More than the earlier grievances, which were timeless pronouncements about freedom and representative government, Grievance 27 requires assessment through an 18th century lens. While exceptional, the Declaration of Independence signatories were men of their time. The Declaration of Independence affirmed that “all men are created equal,” but served as the rallying cry for a fledgling nation with a slave-dependent economic model.

George Washington characterized his ownership of slaves as “the only unavoidable subject of regret” and released his slaves in his will. Thomas Jefferson, who described slavery as a “great political and moral evil,” yet owned hundreds of slaves and likely fathered children with one of them – Sally Hemings. As they came of age, Jefferson or his will freed four of Hemings’ children.

Our Founding Fathers would undoubtedly be relieved that slavery was ultimately abolished. They expected their posterity to build on their work and ideas, with George Washington famously quipping that he didn’t believe the Constitution would last more than 20 years. The Declaration of Independence is replete with immutable, universal truths – life, liberty, representative government, and the rule of law. It was written by brilliant but imperfect men that, like all of us, were creatures of their historical era. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s observation that, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” aptly describes our nation’s miraculous story.

CONCLUSION: OUR LIVES, FORTUNES, AND SACRED HONOR

"We have taken the Founders' closing words as more than a toast and allowed their pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to shape the people we still hope to be."

By Katherine T. Bennett

By the time the Declaration reaches its closing paragraphs, the colonists have documented a long train of abuse and usurpations. They have shown how laws were blocked, assemblies dissolved, courts bent, trade cut off, and taxes imposed without consent. But, before we conclude our series on the Founders' inspiration, we must look at the words that follow their reasons for independence.

Before these men declare independence, they pause to remind the reader—and themselves—that they did not rush there.

"In every stage of these Oppressions," they write, "we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury."

That sentence does two things at once. It establishes that the Founders exhausted peaceful remedies and signals a profound shift in responsibility. If "repeated Petitions" are met with "repeated Injury," then the fault can no longer be described as an error or misunderstanding.

Only then do they declare:

"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."

The pledge is not a flourish. It is the final piece of the argument. If they mean what they have said, these men must also be willing to bear the costs of acting on that conviction.

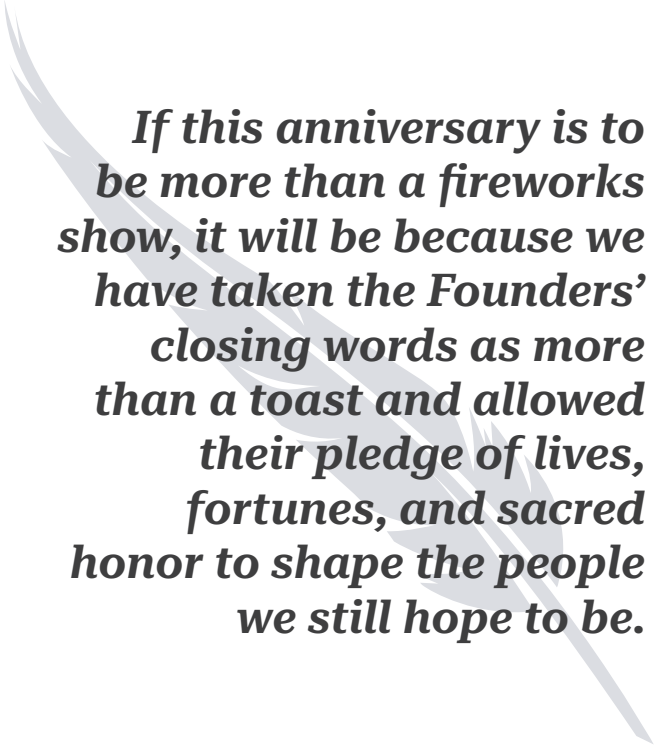
"Lives" comes first because they knew what treason meant.

To sign the Declaration was to risk being hanged under laws already enforced by standing armies, "mock Trials," and transport "beyond Seas" for "pretended offenses." Pledging their lives meant acknowledging that the struggle for self-government might claim them personally. It is one thing to say a prince has become a tyrant. It is another to accept that, in saying so, you may lose your own life under his rule.

"Fortunes" follows because they had seen what imperial policy could do to property.

Ports closed, trade "with all parts of the world" cut off, taxes "imposed... without our consent," officers sent "to harass our people, and eat out their Substance." To pledge their fortunes was to accept that ships, homes, and businesses might be ruined; that the livelihoods on which their families depended could be destroyed in the conflict they now believed justice required. They held that government exists to secure property, yet they knew that defending that principle might mean losing their own.

The pledge is not a flourish. It is the final piece of the argument. If they mean what they have said, these men must also be willing to bear the costs of acting on that conviction.



If this anniversary is to be more than a fireworks show, it will be because we have taken the Founders' closing words as more than a toast and allowed their pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to shape the people we still hope to be.

Finally, their “sacred Honor.”

They placed their commitment to one another and to their cause in a different category from ordinary promises. Having appealed to “the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions,” they now bind their names to that appeal, trusting that history and providence will judge whether they were faithful. In a document that catalogs charters and processes bent to convenience, this final sentence is a deliberate act of covenant.

On the 250th anniversary of this pledge, we as the American people pause. The Semiquincentennial is a chance to give thanks for that rare combination of thought and courage our Founders displayed; for a document that ends not in self-congratulation, but in a mutual vow of sacrifice, and for authors who bound their own names to the hope that a free people could govern themselves by consent and by written commitments.

As we move into the next 250 years, we must reflect on how we intend to carry our nation forward. If this anniversary is to be more than a fireworks show, it will be because we have taken the Founders' closing words as more than a toast and allowed their pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to shape the people we still hope to be.

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