

King George III didn't start out as the bad guy and 4 other things to know about the founding of the US

ASU constitutional scholar shares insight into how Americans began to govern themselves

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of our coverage for [America's semiquincentennial](#).

Most people know about the Declaration of Independence, but not many people know it was preceded by a similar declaration years earlier that set the stage for 1776.

[Sean Beienburg](#), an associate professor at ASU's [School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership](#) and the interim director of its [Center for American Civics](#), is an advocate for a more robust civics education in the United States.

In fact, a 2024 [survey](#) found that 70% of Americans failed a basic civics literacy quiz.

"If you ask, 'How many of you know what's in the First Amendment?' they all raise their hand," Beienburg said. "They know freedom of speech, but we're not used to asking, 'Is this a state power or a federal power? Is this a congressional power or a presidential power?' Half of Americans don't even know they have a state constitution."

So, in honor of this year's semiquincentennial, we asked Beienburg to share five things about the founding of the U.S. that most people don't realize.

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The declaration before the declaration

Before the Declaration of Independence, adopted in 1776 at the Second Continental Congress, there was the Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, in 1774.

“It’s very similar to the Declaration of Independence insofar as it has a very similar list of ‘Britain has done this thing wrong, this thing wrong, this thing wrong,’” he said.

“It’s ... much more explicit that the real concern isn’t taxation without representation per se. ... It’s that things are so fundamentally different across the Atlantic that even if we had people over there saying, ‘Well, here’s what it’s really like in America,’ they wouldn’t understand it,” he said.

“This is where you see that, especially at the beginning, the American Revolution is about localism, which then turns into American federalism.”

Beienburg thinks the Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress is one of the great underappreciated texts of American history.

“The Declaration of Independence isn’t coming out of nowhere. It’s got this tradition it’s building on, even as it’s doing new things” he said.

A group project

Beienburg thinks that one popular misconception is that Thomas Jefferson pulled the Declaration of Independence out of the ether.

“He writes letters later saying, in effect, ‘My goal wasn’t to come up with new things. It was to be an accurate conveyor of what the American people thought.’

“Which is why the Declaration of Independence isn’t the one that Jefferson drafts. It gets worked over by (John) Adams and (Benjamin) Franklin, and then a committee and then Congress, and they change about a quarter or a third of the language.

“So rather than just thoughts of Jefferson, the declaration is a product of deliberation and consensus trying to reflect the American attitudes more broadly.”

Not undoing the revolution

Another misconception: The U.S. Constitution aims to create a powerful central government.

“It certainly establishes a stronger one, and it bolsters foreign policy strength, interstate commerce powers to stop trade wars, but it doesn’t undo this idea of localism,” Beienburg said.

"The pitch that the Federalist Papers and the defenders of the Constitution are making is to effectively say, 'We are creating a stronger government than the Articles of Confederation, but we don't want a strong and unchecked government like Parliament. We're fixing the mistake of the Articles, which leaned too heavily to the states, but we're not overcorrecting by massively empowering the federal government."

"We are not undoing the American Revolution by saying this government far away will have all this power. ... We've created an independent executive and an independent judiciary that means the federal government can enforce its own laws and raise its own taxes and has a few new essential powers, but still, most power is going to stay with the state level, with this understanding made even more explicit with the 10th Amendment."

Beienburg said that enforcing federalism and the separation of powers is a way to continue to be faithful to the important legacy of the declaration that was later embedded into the Constitution.

"We care about these structures that keep the federal government limited, which has been our long tradition that we've cared about since the very beginning."

Not always the bad guy

Beienburg also says that the villainization of King George III wasn't always part of the narrative.

"If I were to ask you, 'Who's the villain in the Declaration of Independence?' It's King George, right? 'George has done this, this and this.' George, this evil tyrant has done all these crimes against colonial liberties.

"But the strange thing is, if you look at the Declaration and Resolves, and other earlier texts, it's always some variation of, 'Parliament is bad. King, please save us because you're on our team.'"

Beienburg points to a letter Adams wrote in 1822 that concedes that King George III was just doing his job — Adams says George III was "cruel in his official capacity only."

"Rhetorically, the emphasis in the Declaration of Independence is on the British king, but actually that's a late shift in the Revolution. Earlier on it had been, 'King, you're our friend.' And then, when the Americans start shooting, he definitively informs them that he can't be their friend, and in fact, they're now traitors."

What happens next?

There also wasn't a consensus on how the states would move forward after independence.

ASU collection includes 'The Federalist Papers'

"The Federalist Papers" is a collection of short essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay in 1788, and is one of the most well-known pro-Constitution writings. Check out ASU's first-edition printing of the volume, and other rare books and manuscripts from America's history, in ASU's [Civic Classics Collection](#).

“There are two very different legacies of the Declaration of Independence in the way that the states build afterward,” Beienburg said.

Pennsylvania’s state constitution was written by a convention presided over by Franklin, and Massachusetts’ was written by Adams. The two are similar in their declaration of rights.

“But the Pennsylvania tradition argues, ‘We have this moment of self-government,’ so they make a constitutional system that has no meaningful separation of powers. They argue that the only real check you need is the people themselves,” he said.

Adams takes the opposite approach.

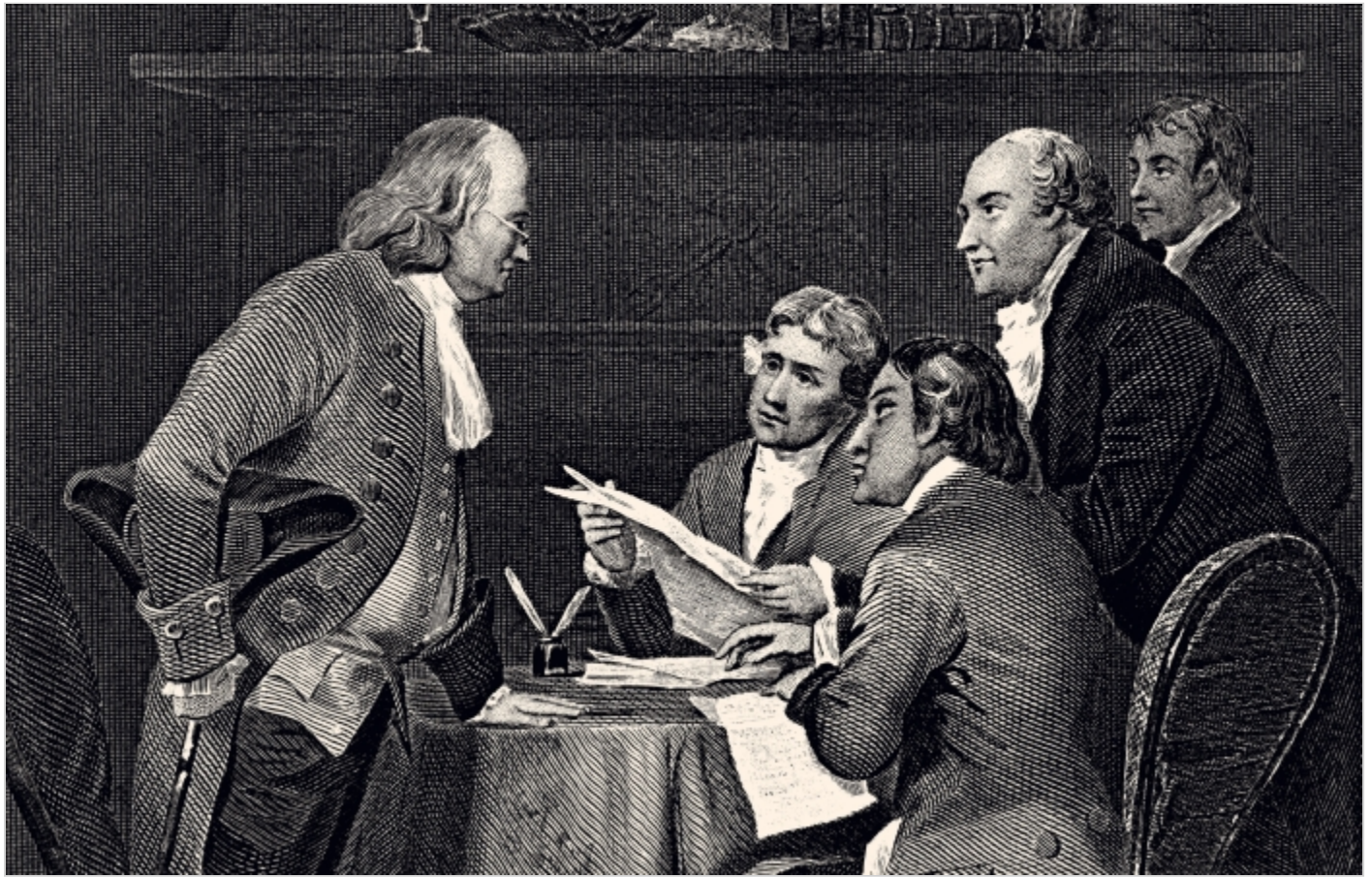
“He writes the Massachusetts Constitution, whose provisions basically say, ‘Representative government is essential, but still, governments can be corrupt, people can be corrupt, majorities can be corrupt.’”

Eventually, the U.S Constitution ended up being based on Adams’ understanding of the Declaration of Independence, requiring robust separation of powers and limits on governmental power.

“They spent a lot of time in the convention writing the U.S. Constitution complaining about the Pennsylvania one,” Beienburg said. “... And indeed, a few years later, even Pennsylvanians revised their state constitution to look more like the U.S. or Massachusetts texts, now understood to embody the clear legacy of the declaration.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



A 19th-century engraving depicting the famous meeting of the Committee of Five in June 1776. On the left, Benjamin Franklin addresses the group. In the center, Thomas Jefferson holds the draft of the Declaration of Independence, surrounded by John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston. Image credit: iStock