

# Heroism and the Declaration of Independence

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## Overview

The Founding Fathers were faced with a critical decision in 1776. Should they continue to endure what they considered to be “a long train of abuses and usurpations” by King George III ? Or should they declare America’s independence from England and establish a new nation? The latter option was a dangerous one. Such an action would be considered treasonous by the British and certainly meant war. Defeat in such a conflict likely meant that American leaders would be tried as traitors and sentenced to death.

In this activity, students will be asked to consider the meaning of heroism. In what way was the signing of the Declaration of Independence a heroic action? What did individual signers risk by their action?

## Standards

**CCE (9-12):** *IIA1, VD4*

**NCHS (5-12):** *Era III, Standards 3A, 3B*

**NCSS:** *Strands 2, 5, 6, and 10*

## Recommended Time

One 45-minute period. Additional time as needed for background and homework.

## Objectives

Students will:

- explain the meaning of heroism
- evaluate the signing of the Declaration of Independence as a heroic moment
- analyze what individual signers stood to lose by supporting American independence
- identify other heroic moments in American history

## Materials

**Student:**

- A copy of the Declaration of Independence  
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/declare.htm>
- Matthew Spalding, “A Note on the Signers of the Declaration of Independence”  
<http://www.heritage.org/research/americanfoundingandhistory/BG1451.cfm>  
(Note: Be sure to scroll to the bottom of the page to find this article.)
- Brief biographies of eleven signers of the Declaration of Independence  
<http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/article.php?sid=420>

**Teacher:**

- A table/desk (optional)
- Quill pen (optional)
- Handouts A,B,C,D

**Lesson Plan**

**I. Background Homework**

- A. Have the students read the following article by Matthew Spalding about the signers of the Declaration of Independence:

“A Note on the Signers of the Declaration of Independence”  
<http://www.meridianmagazine.com/ideas/010704.html>

- B. Have the students write a paragraph in response to this question:

- In what way was the signing of the Declaration of Independence a heroic action?

**II. Warm-up [15 minutes]**

- A. Write on the board the final words of the Declaration of Independence.

“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.”

- B. Ask for volunteers to share their answers to the homework question.

*Answers will vary. Students should recognize that the signers truly risked their lives and fortunes.*

- C. Ask the students to consider the meaning of heroism. Hold up or write on the board the quotations on Handouts A, B, C, and D. Conduct a whole-class discussion about the questions listed below the quotations.

*Answers will vary.*

**III. Activity [25 minutes]**

- A. Divide the students into eleven groups. Have each group read the biography of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence listed below. Then have each group write a sentence or two describing what its assigned Founder risked in choosing to sign the Declaration of Independence.

- B. Next, tell the students that they are about to re-create the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Place a copy of the Declaration on a table. (A printout of the document from the link above is fine; a replica copy is better.) Each group will choose a member to assume the role of the group's assigned Founder. Then the eleven "signers" will, one-by-one, with (quill?) pen in hand, approach the table and announce what they risk in putting their names to this document. Example: "Though I own a large plantation and a shipping business, I am going to sign this document because I believe that liberty is more important than profit."
- C. For more advanced students, have the eleven "signers" sit in a circle and discuss what they are risking in signing the Declaration. The remaining students sit in a wider circle around the eleven signers. After all the signers finish speaking, the other students write a one or two-paragraph summary of what was said. Have volunteers share these summaries with the whole class.

**Signers:**

- John Adams
- Samuel Adams
- Charles Carroll
- Benjamin Franklin
- Elbridge Gerry
- Thomas Jefferson
- Richard Henry Lee
- Benjamin Rush
- Roger Sherman
- James Wilson
- John Witherspoon

<http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/article.php?sid=420>

**IV: Wrap-Up Discussion [5 minutes]**

Conduct a whole-class discussion about the following questions:

- Did the signers of the Declaration have something to gain by their action? If so, does this lessen the heroic nature of their act?

*Answers will vary. Certainly, the signers stand to gain political liberty if they declared independence. Some of the signers—particularly those engaged in international trade, such as Elbridge Gerry— would gain financially. Whether these facts alter the heroic nature of their action is a subjective judgment.*

**V. Follow-Up Homework Options**

- A. Students could make a list of five people—living or dead—whom they consider to be heroes. They should write a sentence or two for each person, explaining why they think each is a

hero. (The list may include a group of people, such as the New York City Firefighters who died at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.)

B. Students could write a three-to-five paragraph biography of one person whom they consider to be a hero. Possibilities include:

- Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643): a religious dissenter in Puritan Massachusetts who challenged the established religion and government of her day
- Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865): sixteenth President of the United States who issued the Emancipation Proclamation
- John Minor Wisdom: (1905-1999): a federal justice who challenged the prevailing racist attitudes of his time and place
- Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968): civil rights leader who inspired millions and won equality before the law for African-Americans
- Ronald Reagan (1911-): fortieth President of the United States who guided America to victory in the Cold War

## **VI. Extension**

Students could list moments in American history after 1776 in which a person or people acted heroically. (Examples might include George Washington's quashing of the Newburgh conspiracy in 1783, a civil rights march of the 1960s, Lenny Skutnik's jumping into an icy Potomac River to rescue a woman involved in the crash of an Air Florida jetliner.)

**“Unhappy is the land  
that needs heroes.”**

--Bertolt Brecht

Question:

Are heroes important to a nation?

**“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.”**

--Scripture: John 15:13

Question:

How does heroism involve love?

**“The history of the  
world is but the  
biography of heroes.”**

--Thomas Carlyle

Question:

How can heroism influence the course of history?

**“Nurture your mind  
with great thoughts; to  
believe in the heroic  
makes heroes.”**

--Benjamin Disraeli

Question:

How does having heroes encourage a person to act heroically?