From 1774 to 1789, the Continental Congress served as the government of the 13 American colonies and later the United States. The First Continental Congress, which was comprised of delegates from the colonies, met in 1774 in reaction to the Coercive Acts, a series of measures imposed by the British government on the colonies in response to their resistance to new taxes. In 1775, the Second Continental Congress convened after the American Revolutionary War (1775-83) had already begun. In 1776, it took the momentous step of declaring America’s independence from Britain. Five years later, the Congress ratified the first national constitution, the Articles of Confederation, under which the country would be governed until 1789, when it was replaced by the current U.S. Constitution.

France and Spain had long been spoiling for a rematch with Great Britain, and America knew it. During the Seven Years’ War against Britain, which ended in 1763, with France lost Canada and its central political position in Europe and Spain gave up both Florida and its dominance over the Gulf of Mexico. American independence was a means of weakening British domination in Europe and overseas.
In January 1776, political theorist Thomas Paine made explicit the connection between a written declaration of independence and a potential military alliance in his smash bestseller, *Common Sense*. “Every thing that is right or natural pleads for separation,” he implored. “TIS TIME TO PART”. Neither France nor Spain would be willing to help out British subjects, he warned. “The custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations.”

When armed conflict between bands of American colonists and British soldiers began in April 1775, the Americans were ostensibly fighting only for their rights as subjects of the British crown. By the following summer, with the Revolutionary War in full swing, the movement for independence from Britain had grown, and delegates of the Continental Congress were faced with a vote on the issue. In mid-June 1776, a five-man committee including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin was tasked with drafting a formal statement of the colonies’ intentions. The Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence—written largely by Jefferson—in Philadelphia on July 4, a date now celebrated as the birth of American independence.