

LETTER TO HENRY LEE

THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743–1826)

from *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pp. 11-12

The elder Thomas Jefferson answered hundreds of letters, including, in this instance, a query about the Declaration of Independence, explaining that it drew upon a long political and philosophical tradition and reflected principles widely understood by Americans of the founding era.

MAY 8, 1825

....But with respect to our rights, and the acts of the British government contravening those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American whigs thought alike on these subjects. When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc....

Thomas Jefferson, "To Henry Lee," May 8, 1825, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, "Federal Edition," Vol. 10 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904–5), 342–43.