

THE RIGHT TO ALTER OR TO ABOLISH

The Declaration of Independence and the Machinery of Peaceful Change in Modern America

“That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” — Declaration of Independence, 1776

I. WHAT THE SENTENCE ACTUALLY CLAIMS

This clause sits in the middle of the Declaration's second paragraph, right after the more famous line about unalienable rights — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Its logic runs in a specific order. Governments exist, the Declaration says, “to secure these rights,” and they draw their “just powers from the consent of the governed.” Government is therefore not the source of rights; it is an instrument built to protect rights that already exist. The moment that instrument turns against its own purpose — becomes “destructive of these ends” — the people who consented to it retain the authority to change it or replace it.

This is not a throwaway line. It is the hinge the entire document turns on: everything before it explains why rights exist and where the government gets its authority; everything after it is the specific list of grievances meant to prove that Britain's government had, in fact, crossed that line.

II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

Thomas Jefferson was not inventing this idea. He was restating, in condensed and durable language, the social contract theory that had been developing in English political thought for over a century, most directly through John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689). Locke argued that people leave the state of nature and form governments by mutual consent, for the specific purpose of protecting life, liberty, and property. When a government breaks that trust — when it acts as though it owns the people rather than serves them — it dissolves its own legitimacy, and authority reverts to the people who granted it in the first place.

The same document that asserts this right also cautions against using it lightly. Jefferson wrote, in the sentence immediately following the one quoted above, that “prudence... will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes,” and that people are “more disposed to suffer, while evils are

sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” The right to alter or abolish was framed as a last resort, invoked only “when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism.” It is a safety valve, not a standing invitation.

III. THE FOUNDERS' OWN ANSWER: BUILT-IN MECHANISMS FOR CHANGE

In 1776, the only tool available to alter or abolish an unresponsive government was revolution, because the colonies had no vote in Parliament and no constitutional process for peaceful separation. The framers who wrote the Constitution eleven years later understood this problem and tried to solve it — they built the “alter or abolish” principle directly into the structure of the new government, so that future generations would not need muskets to exercise it. That is the throughline connecting 1776 to the present: the right described in the Declaration did not disappear after independence was won; it was institutionalized. The sections below describe the specific, lawful channels through which the sovereignty of “the People” operates in the United States today.

A. The Ballot Box — Elections

The most direct and most frequently used expression of the “consent of the governed” is the regular, peaceful transfer of power through elections. The President, the entire House of Representatives, one-third of the Senate, and the great majority of state and local officials face the voters on fixed cycles set by the Constitution and by state law. A government whose policies the electorate finds destructive of its safety or happiness can, within a term or two, be replaced entirely through this single mechanism — without a single law being broken or a single building stormed.

B. Constitutional Amendment — Article V

The Constitution itself can be altered through the amendment process laid out in Article V: proposal by two-thirds of both houses of Congress (or by a convention called at the request of two-thirds of state legislatures), followed by ratification by three-fourths of the states. This is the formal, textual version of “instituting new Government... laying its foundation on such principles... as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” It has been used twenty-seven times, including to abolish slavery, extend the vote to women and to eighteen-year-olds, and limit presidential terms.

C. Judicial Review and the Courts

Since *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), the federal courts have held the power to strike down laws and executive actions that violate the Constitution. This gives citizens and states a

lawful avenue to challenge government action they believe has exceeded its just powers, without waiting for the next election or amending the Constitution itself.

D. State-Level Direct Democracy

Roughly half the states allow citizens to bypass their own legislatures entirely through mechanisms the federal Constitution does not provide:

- Ballot initiatives — citizens draft and vote directly on proposed laws or state constitutional amendments.
- Referenda — voters can approve or reject laws the legislature has already passed.
- Recall elections — voters can remove a sitting official before their term ends.

These tools exist precisely because state constitutions, many written or revised in the Progressive Era, tried to make the Declaration's principle operational at a smaller, faster scale than the federal amendment process allows.

E. The First Amendment — Speech, Press, Assembly, and Petition

The right to organize, publish, protest, and petition government for a redress of grievances is the daily, low-friction version of “alter or abolish.” Political parties, advocacy organizations, independent journalism, and peaceable public demonstration all function as pressure that can change law and leadership without any of it being written into the Constitution as a formal procedure. This is where most political change actually begins — as organized public argument, long before it becomes a bill, a ballot measure, or a court case.

F. Impeachment and Removal

Article I gives Congress the power to impeach and remove the President, Vice President, federal judges, and other civil officers for “Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.” This is the Constitution's built-in mechanism for removing an individual officer whose conduct has become destructive of the government's proper ends, without dissolving the government itself.

G. Federalism as a Pressure Valve

Because the United States divides power between federal and state governments, citizens dissatisfied with policy at one level retain meaningful recourse at another. States have historically served as, in Justice Brandeis's phrase, “laboratories of democracy,” adopting different approaches that can later inform national policy — another way the system absorbs disagreement without requiring wholesale replacement of government.

IV. WHY THIS MATTERS: THE DECLARATION'S PRINCIPLE, TODAY

Read together, these mechanisms are the modern, lawful fulfillment of the Declaration's claim that the people may alter or abolish a government that no longer serves them. The difference between 1776 and today is not that the right disappeared — it is that the United States now has a functioning constitutional system explicitly designed to let that right operate without revolution: through elections, amendment, courts, state-level direct democracy, free political speech, impeachment, and federalism. Each is slower and more constrained than force, and each requires the same thing the original clause did — that the change be undertaken by the people acting together, not by any individual or faction acting alone, and grounded in “principles... most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” rather than the interest of one part of the country against another.

The Founders' caution about not changing government “for light and transient causes” remains relevant as well. The existence of these mechanisms is itself an argument for using them: a government that provides orderly channels for its own correction has already answered, in large part, the objection that it has become “destructive of these ends.” The measure of whether the Declaration's principle is being honored today is not whether government is ever imperfect — it always will be — but whether the channels for peacefully altering it remain open, honest, and available to all the governed, not merely to some of them.

V. CLOSING

The sentence quoted at the top of this document is sometimes read as a call to revolution held in reserve. It is more accurately read as a statement of first principles: government exists by consent and for a purpose, and when it fails that purpose, sovereignty returns to the people who authorized it. What the American constitutional system did, in the decade after independence, was translate that principle from a right exercised through force into a set of rights exercised through process — the vote, the amendment, the court, the petition, the recall, the free press. Understanding those channels, and using them, is how the Declaration's promise is kept in the ordinary course of a free society, rather than only in its extremity.

Prepared as a general civics and constitutional explainer. Not a statement of Miqdash Bethel Covenant Institution doctrine.