

Primary Sources: Declaration of the Rights of Man

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This representation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, painted in 1789, includes the "eye of providence" symbol (an eye in triangle). Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier

Editor's Note: After fighting in both Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War, the French government was deeply in debt. It tried to recover financially by passing unpopular taxes. Additionally, due to food shortages across the country, the populace grew frustrated with the aristocracy who still enjoyed lives of luxury. People started to demand a new constitution and started a revolution to overthrow the monarchy. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was the first step toward writing a constitution for France. It was adopted by the National Constituent Assembly, August 26, 1789.

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social body, shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and

may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all. Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

Articles:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.
2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.
4. Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.
5. Law can only prohibit such actions as are hurtful to society. Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be forced to do anything not provided for by law.
6. Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.
7. No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases and according to the forms prescribed by law. Any one soliciting, transmitting, executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished. But any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of the law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offense.
8. The law shall provide for such punishments only as are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one shall suffer punishment except it be legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated before the commission of the offense.
9. As all persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty, if arrest shall be deemed indispensable, all harshness not essential to the securing of the prisoner's person shall be severely repressed by law.

10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.
11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.
12. The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted.
13. A common contribution is essential for the maintenance of the public forces and for the cost of administration. This should be equitably distributed among all the citizens in proportion to their means.
14. All the citizens have a right to decide, either personally or by their representatives, as to the necessity of the public contribution; to grant this freely; to know to what uses it is put; and to fix the proportion, the mode of assessment and of collection and the duration of the taxes.
15. Society has the right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.
16. A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.
17. Since property is an inviolable and sacred right, no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it, and then only on condition that the owner shall have been previously and equitably indemnified.

Approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789

Quiz

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraph 1] of the document. Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this paragraph?
- (A) The French people often neglected their social responsibilities, so the National Assembly created a list that would hold the citizens accountable.
 - (B) The French people were satisfied with the job the government was doing, but they wanted to create a more modern government.
 - (C) The representatives who created the declaration believed that laws that protected individual rights would create a fair and universally content society.
 - (D) The representatives who created the declaration wanted to ensure that no one in society would be able to question the ideas of those in power.
- 2 Which of the Articles suggests that government jobs should be given to citizens based on qualifications rather than social class?
- (A) 1
 - (B) 6
 - (C) 11
 - (D) 16
- 3 Which of the following choices accurately states the relationship between the declaration's two central ideas?
- (A) All men have equal and sacred rights; however, social distinctions between classes may sometimes be necessary.
 - (B) All men have equal and sacred rights; therefore, the sole job of the government is to protect the individual rights of its people.
 - (C) The law should be the expression of the people; however, representatives may be chosen in order to put laws into action.
 - (D) The law should be the expression of the people; therefore, all citizens are equally eligible to hold public positions and pay taxes.
- 4 Which Article BEST reflects the central idea that laws must be necessary for society in order to be just?
- (A) 5
 - (B) 7
 - (C) 9
 - (D) 11

Answer Key

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