When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; 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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations [wrongful exercises of authority], pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism [a government in which the ruler exercises absolute power], it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. . . .

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude [righteousness] of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

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.

Discussion Questions

Determining Main Ideas

1. According to the first paragraph, what is the purpose of this document?
2. According to the second paragraph, what is the purpose of government, and when do people have the right to alter or abolish it?
3. Making Inferences Why do you suppose Jefferson felt that it was not only the right, but also the duty, of a people to overthrow a despotic government? How would the history of the world be affected if despotism were allowed to reign unchecked?
LITERATURE SELECTION from The Recantation of Galileo Galilei by Eric Bentley

In the 1600s, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the earth was the center of the universe. Galileo Galilei, however, observed otherwise. After publicly supporting Copernicus's theory that the earth revolves around the sun, Galileo was declared a heretic. At odds with church teachings, he was asked to recant, or formally deny, this theory. As you read this play excerpt, think about the consequences of Galileo's struggle with the Church.

Guards in the entrance hall. Castelli [Galileo's assistant] is eating lunch from a tray.
Guard. The Commissar General.
Firenzuala enters.

FIRENZUALA. TO CASTELLI. I wish to see the professor alone.

CASTELLI goes out to a back room where, we can assume, Galileo has been resting. Enter Galileo.
The two men stand facing each other.

FIRENZUALA. Please be seated, Professor. Galileo sits. A private conference between the two of us has been deemed desirable before the tribunal reconvenes. Is that agreeable to you?

GALILEO. Has nothing been decided yet?

FIRENZUALA. I represent the Inquisition. May I use our method of procedure?

GALILEO. By all means.

FIRENZUALA. I shall begin by sounding you out a little. What is your own sense of the situation?

GALILEO. Do I know what the situation now is?

FIRENZUALA. Of the situation . . . as it has developed during the hearing. How would you say you were doing?

GALILEO. Not too badly. I nailed down the main weaknesses in Scheiner's [the leading Jesuit scientist] position.

FIRENZUALA. You maintained—correct me if I'm wrong—that he is a liar. Even a forger.

GALILEO. I proved those things.

FIRENZUALA. And proof lies very near to your heart, isn't that true?

GALILEO. That is very true.

FIRENZUALA. Would you expect Scheiner to enjoy being exposed?

GALILEO. No.

FIRENZUALA. Yet you needed him. No one but he had read your book.

GALILEO. The others could read my book.

FIRENZUALA. And understand it?

GALILEO. I could help them understand it.

FIRENZUALA. Between now and tomorrow's session?

GALILEO. The world has waited for centuries for these truths. The tribunal could wait another week or two.

FIRENZUALA. And in that spirit you have appealed from Scheiner to the six cardinals?

GALILEO. Yes.

FIRENZUALA. Three of whom, like Scheiner himself, are members of the Society of Jesus.

GALILEO. Silence. Any comment?

GALILEO. Your own irony is a comment. But not mine.

FIRENZUALA. You wouldn't, of course, have made this appeal if you didn't think it could succeed?

GALILEO. I wouldn't. No.

FIRENZUALA. What are—or were—its chances of success?

GALILEO. Oh, about fifty-fifty.

FIRENZUALA. Yes?

GALILEO. Lucignano's friendly, isn't he? Corrazio and Sordi will jog along behind him. I should think. That's half the tribunal.

FIRENZUALA. You need five votes.

GALILEO. Are you assuming that the individual Jesuits don't think for themselves?

FIRENZUALA. What would you assume?

GALILEO. That they have to. Because they respect themselves. And their Order knows about science . . . They are not inquisitors, they are Catholics, Father Commissar!

FIRENZUALA. Ah, then you have a better than fifty-fifty chance?

GALILEO. Maybe. If this must be regarded as a gamble. I'd have said faith had something to do with it. You know, the faith which can move mountains.