**Analysis activity 4.2: Historical interpretation**

Regarding the *Declaration of Independence*, historian Francis Jennings has called it ‘a magnificent statement of principle and fact that shows how strongly minds can be swayed by mere words when crafted by a master’. He argues that though colonists often blamed British politicians for their ill treatment in the 1700s, by the time the Declaration was being drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, ‘it had become clear that Parliament did what George III wanted done’. Jefferson therefore ‘understood that no arguments could sway American opinions as well as the actions of George III’. Jennings first directly quotes Jefferson’s words in the Declaration:

*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.*

Jennings continues, summarising the complaints of the Americans:

*[King George] had assented to Parliament’s ‘acts of pretended Legislation,’ besides refusing to assent to proper laws, ‘the most wholesome and necessary for the public good’. He had dissolved colonial legislatures ‘for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.’ He had ‘made Judges dependent on his Will alone.’ He had harassed the people with ‘a multitude of New Officers’ and ‘swarms of Offices.’ He had sent standing armies ‘to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.’*

*…*

*This royal criminal had ‘abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us. He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the Lives of our people’ and ‘He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny … with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages.’*

Jennings then presents a critique:

*Even as propaganda, that last was a bit shrill. Jefferson knew history, and circumstances of cruelty and perfidy were among history’s most common phenomena. But propaganda aims at effect rather than accuracy.*

*…*

*Maybe one should not raise questions about great propaganda documents. Despite its power, the Declaration was not perfect even in its bill of complaints. It is hardly necessary to note again the abysmal fault in its ‘self-evident’ truth ‘that all men are created equal’ coming from the pen of a slaveholder.*

Source: Jennings, F., *The Creation of America: Through Revolution to Empire*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2000, pp. 168–9

Write a short paragraph response for each of the following questions:

1. Why do you think Jennings calls the *Declaration of Independence* a ‘great propaganda document’?

1. According to Jennings, the Declaration is both a ‘magnificent statement’ and a ‘great propaganda document’. Can you explain how this is possible?

1. Though he calls Jefferson a ‘master’ writer, how does Jennings question the ethics of Jefferson being the author of the Declaration?