

Lesson 5: The Guiding Star of Equality: The Declaration of Independence in American History

Background Essay: Applying the Ideals of the Declaration of Independence

Guiding Questions

- Why have Americans consistently appealed to the Declaration of Independence throughout U.S. history?
 - How have the ideals in the Declaration of Independence affected the struggle for equality throughout U.S. history?
- I can explain how the ideals of the Declaration of Independence have inspired individuals and groups to make the United States a more equal and just society.

Essential Vocabulary

appealed	to point to as evidence
apprehend	understand
bestowed	gave
conceived	created
Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions	a list released by Seneca Falls of injustices committed against women
deriving	receiving
<i>Dred Scott v. Sanford</i>	an infamous Supreme Court decision that ruled the Constitution was not meant to allow Blacks to become citizens in the United States
endowed	given
fall heir	to inherit
forfeited	given up
four score and seven years	87 years
inalienable	impossible to take away
inherent	a permanent quality
instituted	established
in vain	for no reason
maxim	a fundamental principle
object	goal
perish	pass away
petitioning	bringing complaints to the government
Progressives	a political and social reform group that began in the late 19th century

promissory note	a signed promise to pay money to someone
proposition	idea
self-determination	the ability of the people to govern their country without foreign involvement
self-evident	obvious
Seneca Falls Convention	the first women's rights convention held in the United States
sovereign	possessing ultimate power
Spanish-American War	a war that brought the United States into more involvement in world affairs
unalienable	impossible to take away
usurpations	violations

<p>In an 1857 speech criticizing the Supreme Court decision in <i>Dred Scott v. Sanford</i> (1857), Abraham Lincoln commented that the principle of equality in the Declaration of Independence was “meant to set up a standard maxim [fundamental principle] for a free society.” Indeed, throughout American history, many Americans appealed to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence to make liberty and equality a reality for all.</p> <p>A constitutional democracy requires vigorous deliberation and debate by citizens and their representatives. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the meanings and implications of the Declaration of Independence and its principles have been debated and contested throughout history. This civil and political dialogue helps Americans understand the principles and ideas upon which their country was founded and the means of working to achieve them.</p>	Notes
<p>Applying the Declaration of Independence from the Founding through the Civil War</p> <p>Individuals appealed [pointed to as evidence] to the principles of the Declaration of Independence soon after it was signed. In the 1770s and 1780s, enslaved people in New England appealed to the natural rights principles of the Declaration and state constitutions as they petitioned legislatures and courts for freedom and the abolition of slavery. A group of enslaved people in New Hampshire stated, “That the God of Nature, gave them, Life, and Freedom, upon the Terms of the most perfect Equality with other men; That Freedom is an inherent [of a permanent quality] Right of the human Species, not to be surrendered, but by Consent.” While some of these petitions were unsuccessful, others led to freedom for the petitioner.</p>	Notes

<p>The women and men who assembled at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, the first women’s rights conference held in the United States, adopted the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, a list of injustices committed against women. The document was modeled after the Declaration of Independence, but the language was changed to read, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: [clear without having to be stated] that all men and women are created equal.” It then listed several grievances regarding the inequalities that women faced. The document served as a guiding star in the long struggle for women’s suffrage.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>The Declaration of Independence was one of the centerpieces of the national debate over slavery. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Abby Kelley all invoked the Declaration of Independence in denouncing slavery. On the other hand, Senators Stephen Douglas and John Calhoun, Justice Roger Taney, and Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens all denied that the Declaration of Independence was meant to apply to Black people.</p> <p>Abraham Lincoln was president during the crisis of the Civil War, which was brought about by this national debate over slavery. He consistently held that the Declaration of Independence had universal natural rights principles that were “applicable to all men and all time.” In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln stated that the nation was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>The Declaration at Home and Abroad: The Twentieth Century and Beyond</p> <p>The case of <i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> (1896) revealed a split over the meaning of the equality principle even in the Supreme Court. The majority in the 7–1 decision thought that distinctions and inequalities based upon race did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment and did not imply inferiority, and therefore, segregation was constitutional. Dissenting Justice John Marshall Harlan argued for equality when he famously wrote, “In the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is colorblind.”</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>

<p>The expansion of American world power in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898 triggered another debate inspired by the Declaration of Independence. The war brought the United States into more involvement in world affairs. Echoing earlier debates over Manifest Destiny during nineteenth-century westward expansion, supporters of American global expansion argued that the country would bring the ideals of liberty and self-government to those people who had not previously enjoyed them. On the other hand, anti-imperialists countered that creating an American empire violated the Declaration of Independence by taking away the liberty of self-determination, or freedom of government without foreign interference, and consent from Filipinos and Cubans.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>Politicians of differing perspectives viewed the Declaration in opposing ways during the early twentieth century. Progressives [a political and social reform group that began in the late 19th century] such as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson argued that the principles of the Declaration of Independence were important for an earlier period in American history, to gain independence from Great Britain and to set up the new nation. They argued that the modern United States faced new challenges introduced by an industrial economy and needed a new set of ideas that required a more active government and more powerful national executive. They were less concerned with preserving an ideal of liberty and equality and more concerned with regulating society and the economy for the public interest. Wilson in particular rejected the views of the Founding, criticizing both the Declaration and the Constitution as irrelevant for facing the problems of his time.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>President Calvin Coolidge disagreed and adopted a conservative position when he argued that the ideals of the Declaration of Independence should be preserved and respected. On the 150th anniversary of the Declaration, Coolidge stated that the principles formed the American belief system and were still the basis of American republican institutions. They were still applicable regardless of how much society had changed.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>

<p>During World War II, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan threatened the free nations of the world with aggressive expansion and domination. The United States and the coalition of Allied powers fought for several years to reverse their conquests. President Franklin Roosevelt and other free-world leaders proclaimed the principles of liberty and self-government from the Declaration of Independence in documents such as the Atlantic Charter, the Four Freedoms speech, and the United Nations Charter.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>After World War II, American social movements for justice and equality called upon the Declaration of Independence and its principles. For example, in his “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to the Declaration as the “sacred heritage” of the nation but said that it had not lived up to its ideals for Black Americans. King demanded that the United States live up to its “sacred obligation” of liberty and equality for all.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
<p>The natural rights republican ideals of the Declaration of Independence influenced the creation of American constitutional government founded upon liberty and equality. They also shaped the expectation that a free people would live in a just society. Indeed, the Declaration states that to secure natural rights is the fundamental duty of government. Achieving those ideals has always been part of a robust and dynamic debate among the sovereign people and their representatives.</p> <p>Inspired by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, many social movements, politicians, and individuals helped make the United States a more equal and just society. The Emancipation Proclamation; the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; the Nineteenth Amendment; the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were only some of the achievements in the name of equality and justice. As James Madison wrote in <i>Federalist 51</i>, “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained.”</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>