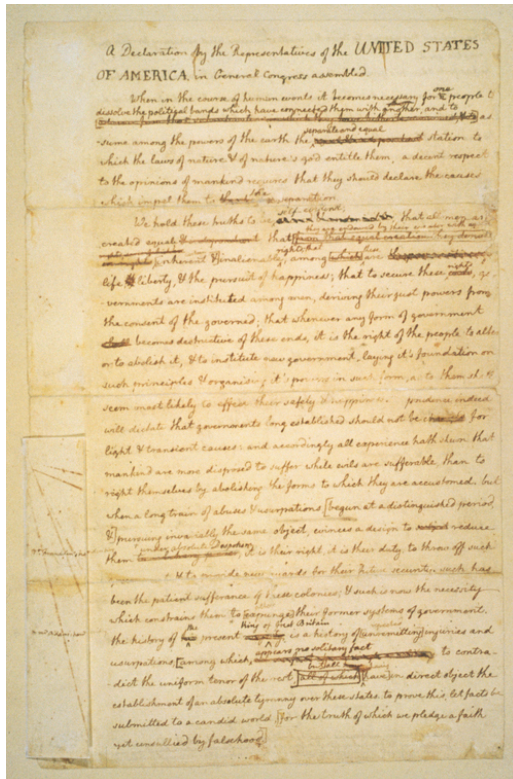


Defining and Debating America's Founding Ideals

What are America's founding ideals, and why are they important?

Introduction



This is an early edited draft of the Declaration of Independence.

On a June day in 1776, Thomas Jefferson set to work in a rented room in Philadelphia to draft a document that would explain to the world why Great Britain's 13 American colonies were declaring themselves to be "free and independent states." The Second Continental Congress had appointed a five-man committee to draft this declaration of independence. At 33, Jefferson was one of the committee's youngest and least experienced members, but his training in law and political philosophy had prepared him for this task. He picked up his pen to write words that would change the world.

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Had he been working at home, Jefferson might have referenced his sizable library for inspiration. Instead, he relied on what was in his head to make the declaration “an expression of the American mind.” He began,

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.

—Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, 1776

In these two sentences, Jefferson established a vision of a new nation based on **ideals**—principles or standards of perfection that we are always trying to achieve. In the years preceding the Declaration, the ideals that Jefferson mentioned had been written about and discussed by many colonists. Since that time, Americans have sometimes fought for and sometimes ignored these ideals. Nevertheless, Jefferson’s words have continued throughout the years to provide a vision of what it means to be an American. In this lesson, you will read about our nation’s founding ideals, how they were defined in 1776, and how they continue to be debated today.



In many ways, Thomas Jefferson, shown here with his fellow committee members Benjamin Franklin (left) and John Adams (center), was an odd choice to write the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was not only young and inexperienced, but he was also a slaveholder. Despite his fine words about liberty and equality, Jefferson proved unwilling to apply his “self-evident” truths to the men and women he held in bondage.



In 1848, a group of women used the Declaration of Independence as a model for their own Declaration of Sentiments on women's rights, in which they declared that "all men and women are created equal." Achieving equality, however, has been a tremendous struggle. This photograph shows a woman, some 60 years later, still marching for the right to vote.

1. The First Founding Ideal: Equality

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

When Jefferson wrote these words, this “truth” was anything but **self-evident**, or obvious. Throughout history, almost all societies had been divided into unequal groups, castes, or **social classes**. Depending on the location and time, the divisions were described in different terms, such as patricians and plebeians, lords and serfs, nobles and commoners, or masters and slaves. Wherever one looked, some people had far more wealth and power than others, and **equality**, or the ideal situation in which all people are treated the same way and valued equally, was the exception, not the rule.

Defining Equality in 1776 For many Americans of Jefferson’s time, the ideal of equality was based on the Christian belief that all people are equal in God’s eyes. The colonists believed they were rooting this ideal in American soil, since they shunned Europe’s social system, with its many ranks of nobility, and prided themselves on having “no rank above that of freeman.”

This view of equality, however, ignored the ranks below “freeman.” In 1776, there was no equality for the half million slaves who labored in the colonies, nor was there equality for women, who were viewed as inferior to men in terms of their ability to participate in society.

Debating Equality Today Throughout time, Americans have made great progress in expanding equality. Since the nation’s founding, constitutional amendments have been created that have abolished slavery (1865) and have guaranteed all American women suffrage, or the right to vote (1920). Many laws today ensure equal treatment of all citizens, regardless of age, gender, physical ability, national background, or race.

Yet some people—both past and present—have argued that achieving equal rights does not necessarily coincide with achieving equality. Americans will not achieve equality, they argue, until we address differences in wealth, education, and power. This “equality of condition” extends to all aspects of life, including living standards, job opportunities, and medical care.

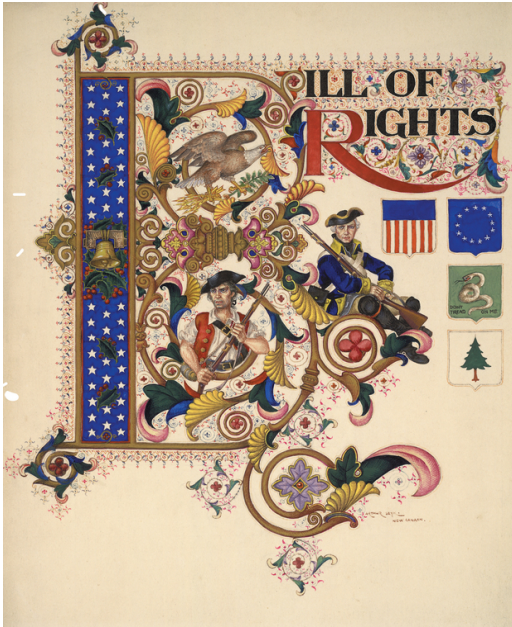
Is equality of condition an achievable goal and, if so, how might it best be achieved? This and other questions about equality will probably continue to be intensely debated for years to come.



For much of American history, African Americans have been treated as less than equal to whites. This was understood by the participants of this civil rights march in Washington, D.C., in 1963. Their signs reminded the nation that each individual in our society should be treated with equal respect.

2. The Second Founding Ideal: Rights

The idea that people have certain **rights**, or powers or privileges granted to people either by an agreement among themselves or by law, would have seemed self-evident to most Americans in Jefferson's day. Because they lived in British colonies, Americans believed that they were entitled to the "rights of Englishmen." These rights, such as the right to a trial by jury or to be taxed only with the people's consent, had been established gradually over hundreds of years. The colonists believed, with some legitimacy, that having these rights set them apart from other peoples in the world.



This celebration of the Bill of Rights was painted by Polish American artist Arthur Szyk in 1949, and includes a number of Revolutionary War-era symbols, such as flags, Minutemen, and America's national bird, the bald eagle. Szyk wanted his work to promote human rights. "Art is not my aim," he maintained, "it is my means."

Defining Rights in 1776 Jefferson, however, was not referencing specific legal or political rights when he wrote of "unalienable rights." Instead, he intended this phrase to address rights so basic and so essential to being human that no government should deny them. Such rights were not, in his opinion, limited to the privileges won by the English people, but were rights belonging to all humankind.

This universal definition of rights was strongly influenced by the English philosopher John Locke, who had argued that all people earned certain **natural rights** simply by being born. Writing a century earlier, Locke identified these natural rights as the rights to life, liberty, and property, and further debated that the main purpose of governments was to preserve and protect these rights. When a government failed in this

duty, citizens had the right to overthrow it.

Debating Rights Today The debate over what rights our government should preserve began more than two centuries ago, with the writing of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and continues to this day. The Constitution (and its amendments) specifies many basic rights, including the right to vote, to speak freely, to choose one's faith, and to receive fair treatment and equal justice under the law. However, some people argue that the government should also protect certain economic and social rights, such as the right to affordable health care or to a clean environment.

Should our definition of rights be expanded to include new privileges, or are there limits to the number of rights a government can protect? Either way, who should decide which rights are right for today?

3. The Third Founding Ideal: Liberty

"That among these [rights] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."



Every year, millions visit the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia's Independence National Historic Park. The huge bell was commissioned by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1753, and its every peal was meant to proclaim "liberty throughout all the land." Badly cracked and battered, the bell is now silent; however, it remains a beloved symbol of freedom.

When Jefferson started writing the Declaration, the colonists had been at war with Britain for more than a year—a war waged in the name of **liberty**, or freedom. Every colony had its liberty trees, its liberty poles, its Sons and Daughters of Liberty (groups organizing against the British), and its flags that proclaimed "Liberty or Death." A recently arrived British immigrant to Maryland said of the colonists, "They are all liberty mad."

Defining Liberty in 1776 Liberty was defined differently by different colonists. For many, liberty meant political freedom, or the right to

participate in public affairs. Additionally, it meant civil liberty, or protection from power of the government to interfere in people's lives. Other colonists perceived liberty as moral and religious freedom. In reality, liberty meant all of this and more.

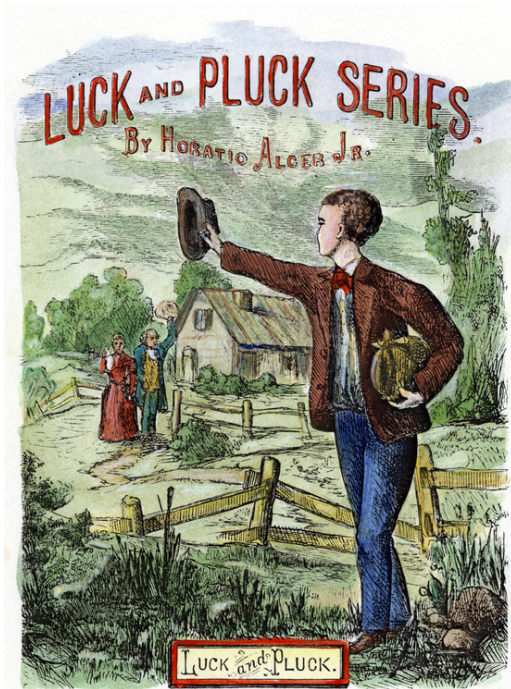
Regardless of how colonists defined liberty, the majority agreed on one point: the opposite of liberty was slavery. "Liberty or slavery is now the question," declared a colonist arguing for independence in 1776. Such conversation raised a disturbing question: If so many Americans were angry about liberty, what should this mean for the one-fifth of the colonial population who labored as slaves? On the controversial issue of slavery in a land of liberty, there was no consensus.

Debating Liberty Today If asked to define liberty today, most Americans would probably respond that it means the freedom to make choices about who we are, what we believe, and how we live. For people to maintain complete freedom, there must be no restrictions on how they think, speak, or act. Furthermore, they must be conscious of what their choices are and have the power to decide among those choices. However, most Americans would probably also agree that liberty is not absolute, and that in all societies, there are limitations on liberty. Americans are not, for example, free to ignore laws or to recklessly endanger others.

Precisely how liberty should be limited is a matter of debate. For example, most of us support freedom of speech, especially when it coincides with speech we agree with. But what about speech that we disagree with or that hurts others, such as hate speech? Should people be at liberty to say anything they please, no matter how hurtful it is to others, or should liberty be limited at times to serve a greater good? If so, who should decide how, why, and under what circumstances liberty should be limited?

4. The Fourth Founding Ideal: Opportunity

"That among these [rights] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."



Horatio Alger Jr., author of *Strive and Succeed*, wrote more than 100 “dime novels” in the late 1800s. Many of these inexpensive books were about opportunity, like this one titled *Luck and Pluck*.

Something curious happened to John Locke’s definition of natural rights in Jefferson’s hands. Locke had included property as the third and final right in his list, but Jefferson replaced property with “the pursuit of Happiness.” The noted American historian Page Smith observed of this decision,

The change was significant and very American . . . The kings and potentates, the powers and principalities of this world [would not] have thought of including “happiness” among the rights of a people . . . except for a select and fortunate few. The great mass of people were doomed to labor by the sweat of their brows, tirelessly and ceaselessly, simply in order to survive . . . It was an inspiration on Jefferson’s part to replace [property] with “pursuit of happiness” . . . It embedded in the opening sentences of the declaration that comparatively new . . .

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idea that a life of weary toil . . . was not the only possible destiny of “the people.”

—Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins*, 1976

The destiny that Jefferson imagined was one of endless **opportunity**, or the chance for people to pursue their hopes and dreams.

Defining Opportunity in 1776 The idea that America was a land of opportunity was as old as the colonies themselves. Very soon after colonist John Smith first arrived in Jamestown in 1607, he proclaimed that here “every man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land.” Although Jamestown did not live up to this promise, opportunity was the great lure that drew colonists across the Atlantic to pursue new lives in a new land.

Debating Opportunity Today More than two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence was penned and signed, the ideal of opportunity still draws newcomers to our shores. For most, economic opportunity and the hope of finding work at a decent wage is the most substantial draw. For others, opportunity means the chance to reunite families, acquire an education, or live in peace by escaping poor conditions in other countries.

For all Americans, the ideal of opportunity raises important questions. Has the United States offered equal opportunity to all of its people, or have some enjoyed more opportunity to pursue their dreams than others? Is it enough to “level the playing field” so that everyone has the same chance to succeed in life, or should special efforts be made to expand opportunities for the least fortunate among us?



Many people come to America searching for opportunities to achieve the American dream, or the concept that people can become successful through hard work, courage, and concern for others.

5. The Fifth Founding Ideal: Democracy

*"That to secure these rights,
Governments are instituted among
Men, deriving their just powers from
the consent of the governed."*



The right to vote is so instrumental to a democracy that most Americans today think little about it. For much of our history, however, this right was denied to women and most African Americans because their “consent” was not considered important to those who governed.

In these few words, Jefferson described the basis of a **democracy**—a system of government founded on the simple principle that the power to rule derives from the consent of the governed. Power is not inherited by family members, as in a **monarchy**, nor is it seized and exercised forcefully, as in a **dictatorship**. In a democracy, the people retain the power to select their leaders and influence the laws that govern them.

Defining Democracy in 1776 The people had run their local governments for many generations, so colonists were familiar with the workings of democracy. In town meetings and colonial assemblies, colonists had learned to collaborate to solve common problems. They were confident that democracy worked on a small scale, but two questions remained. First, could democracy be adjusted to function in a country spread over more than 1,000 miles? In 1776, many people were unsure that it could be done.

The second question was this: Who should speak for “the governed”? In colonial times, only white, adult, property-owning men were permitted to vote or hold office, and this narrow definition of voters did not please many Americans. “How can a Man be said to [be] free and independent,” protested citizens of Massachusetts in 1778, “when he has not a voice allowed him” to vote? As for women, their voices were not yet considered in any way.

Debating Democracy Today The debate regarding who should speak for the governed was long and arduous. It took women more than a century of tenacious struggle to attain voting rights, and democracy was denied to many minority groups for even longer. Today, the right to vote is universal for all American citizens over the age of 18.

Despite having gained the right to vote, many people today do not use it, and their lack of participation raises challenging and compelling questions. Why do so many Americans choose not to make their voices heard? Can democracy survive if large numbers of citizens decide not to participate in public affairs?



The front of the Great Seal features a bald eagle and a shield with 13 red and white stripes, representing the original 13 states. The scroll in the eagle's beak contains our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, which means "Out of Many, One," referring to the creation of one nation from 13 states.

6. In Pursuit of America's Ideals

"Ideals are like stars," observed Carl Schurz, a German American politician in the late 1800s. "You will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and, following them, you reach your destiny." In this program, the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence will serve as your guiding stars. You will encounter these ideals repeatedly—sometimes as points of pride, sometimes as prods to progress, and sometimes as sources of sorrow.

Living up to these ideals has never been a simple task, as ideals represent the absolute highest standards, and human beings are far too complex to easily achieve such perfection. No one illustrates that complexity more clearly than Jefferson. Although Jefferson believed passionately in the Declaration's ideals, he was a slaveholder.

Hypocritically, equality and liberty stopped at the borders of his Virginia plantation. Jefferson's pursuit of happiness depended on depriving the people who labored for him as slaves the right to pursue happiness of their own.

Soon after the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence, it appointed a committee to design an official seal for the United States. The final design appears on the back of the one-dollar bill. One side displays an American bald eagle holding symbols of peace and war, with the eagle facing toward peace. The other depicts an unfinished pyramid, symbolizing strength and endurance. Perhaps another reason for the unfinished pyramid was to illustrate that a nation built on ideals is a work in progress. As long as our founding ideals endure, the United States will constantly be striving to meet them.

Summary

Throughout our history, Americans have been inspired and guided by the ideals in the Declaration of Independence—equality, rights, liberty, opportunity, and democracy. Each generation has struggled with these ideals, and the narrative of their conflict lies at the heart of our nation's history and who we are as Americans.

Equality The Declaration of Independence asserts that “all men are created equal.” During the past two centuries, this definition of equality has broadened to include women and minority groups. However, Americans continue to debate the role of government in promoting equality today.

Rights The Declaration states that we are all born with “certain unalienable Rights.” Exactly what these rights should be has been the subject of never-ending debates.

Liberty One of the rights mentioned in the Declaration is liberty—the right to speak, act, think, and live freely. However, liberty is never absolute or unlimited. Defining the proper limits and restrictions to liberty is a constant challenge to a free people.

Opportunity This ideal lies at the heart of the “American dream.” Additionally, it raises difficult questions about how the U.S. government should promote equal opportunities for all Americans.

Democracy The Declaration of Independence states that

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governments are created by people in order to “secure these rights.” Governments receive their “just powers” to rule from the “consent of the governed.” Today, we define such governments as democracies.