

Great Questions in Government Community Seminar
“We Hold These Truths”

“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”

The Declaration of Independence, 1779

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Seneca Falls Declaration, 1848

“I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.”

Frederick Douglass
July 4 oration delivered to the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, 1852

“If [immigrants to America today] seek to trace their connection with those days [of the Revolution] by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

Abraham Lincoln
July 10, 1858

“When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
Selections from “I Have a Dream” address delivered at

*The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
August 28, 1963*

“On the Statue of Liberty it says, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free” In the Declaration of Independence it is written “All men are created equal and they are endowed with certain inalienable rights” That’s what America is. No matter how hard you try, you cannot erase those words from the Declaration of Independence. No matter how hard you try, you cannot chip those words from off the base of the Statue of Liberty.”

*Harvey Milk
Gay Freedom Day Celebration, 1978*

“America has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by ideals that move beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interest and teach us what it means to be citizens. Every immigrant by embracing these ideals makes our country more, not less, American.”

*George W. Bush
First Inaugural Address, 2001*

“What makes us exceptional -- what makes us American -- is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: '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.' Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time.”

*Barack Obama
Second Inaugural Address, 2012*

"Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope."

*Samuel P. Huntington
American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*

Discussion Questions:

1. If all are created equal, why have we not been able to live that way?
2. When have you either defend or wanted to defend the principle that all are created equal?
3. What does Frederick Douglass mean when he says that the principles of The Declaration of Independence are “saving principles”? What and/or how do these principles “save”?
4. MLK dreams that “one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” What can individuals do to live up to it?