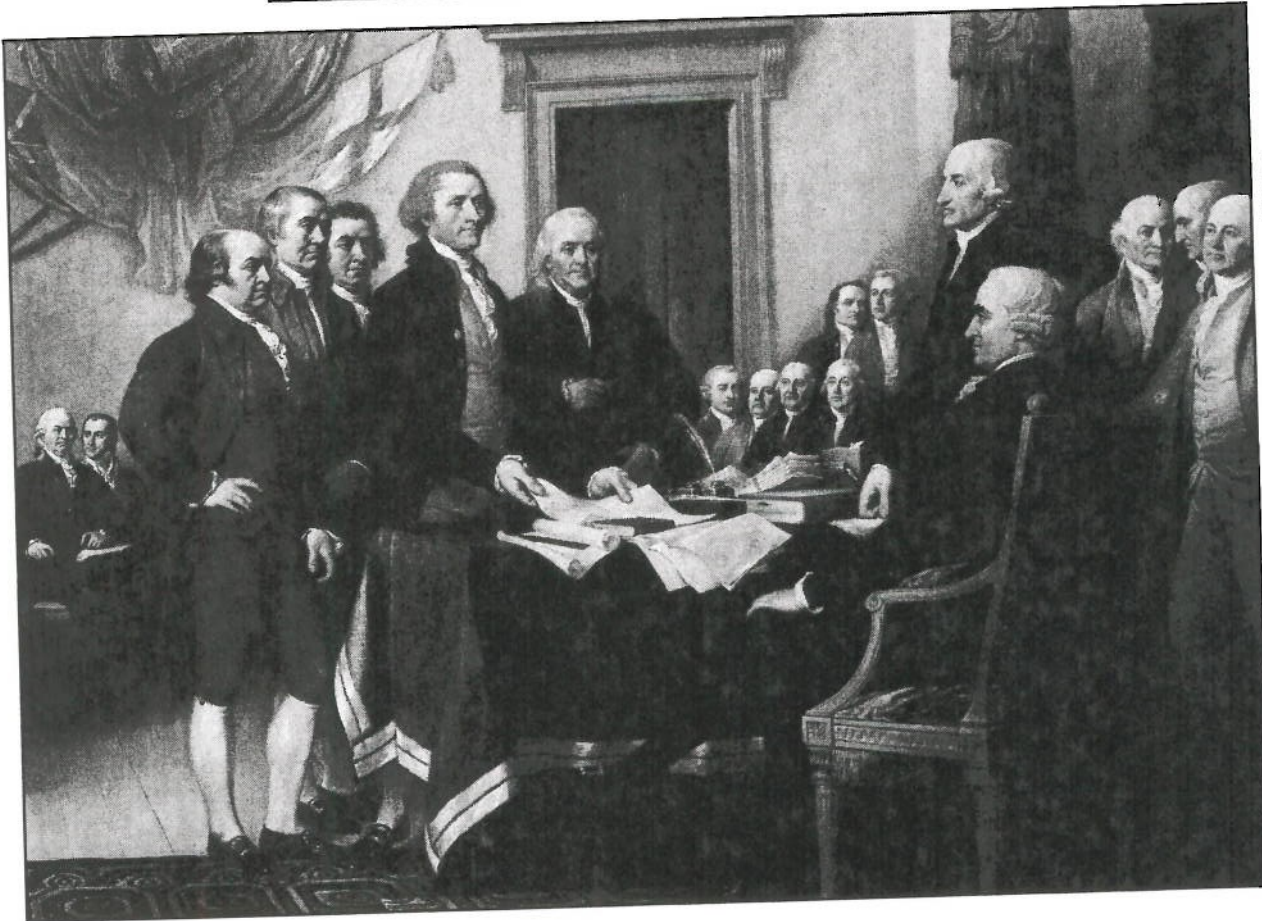


The Ideals of the Declaration: Which Is Most Important?

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Declaration of Independence, John Trumbull, Commissioned 1817; purchased 1819; placed in the Capitol 1826.

Overview: In a recent survey conducted by the National Archives, the Declaration of Independence topped all others to emerge as the “most influential document in American history.” Many Americans think of the Declaration as a symbol of the independence from Great Britain that we celebrate on July 4th. While it is certainly that, the Declaration is also a statement of our nation’s main beliefs about government and its relationship to the people. These beliefs have been the centerpiece of American history for more than 230 years. All the ideas are important, but which is most important? That is the question asked by this Mini-Q.

The Documents:

Document A: Equality

Document B: Right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Document C: Consent of the Governed

Document D: Alter or Abolish Government

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

The Ideals of the Declaration: Which Is Most Important?

History and Structure of the Declaration

By early summer 1776 the Revolutionary War was already a year old. The Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia had appointed a Committee of Five to write a statement explaining the colonists' arguments for **independence** from Great Britain. The Committee of Five asked one of its members, 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson, to take on the job of writing the first draft. After Jefferson prepared the draft, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin suggested some changes. The Committee approved the revised draft, and it was delivered to the Congress. Between July 2 and 4, the Congress made other changes, shortening the document by twenty-five percent. Jefferson was unhappy with these changes, but the structure and powerful words of the document are still his.

In the end, the Declaration would not only shape the government and culture of the United States; it would shape the thinking of the world.

The Declaration has a simple structure:

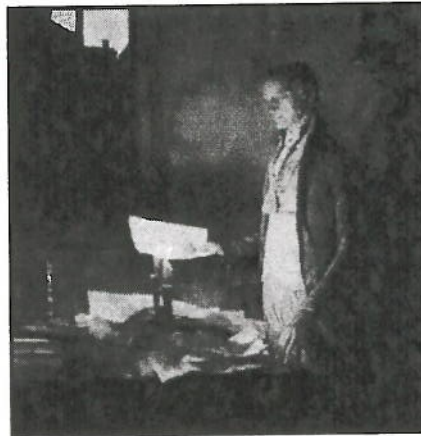
- An introduction saying that we owe the world an explanation for our separation;
- A statement of ideals about government;
- A long list of **grievances** against the British;
- A declaration of independence from Great Britain.

It is the second paragraph of the Declaration – the statement of **ideals** – that will be our focus in this Mini-Q. In this paragraph, Jefferson said:

“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.”

Many historians would argue that this is the most important passage in the most important document in American history. Historians also agree that the exact meaning of key words and phrases is open to interpretation. For example, in the first line Jefferson writes, “all men are



Painting: Thomas Jefferson writing the Declaration of Independence

created equal.” What did he mean by “men”? What did he mean by “equal”? And later in the same sentence, what did Jefferson mean by “Life”? Was he against taking a life? Was he therefore against warfare? And what did he mean by “Liberty”? Was he against slavery even though he owned slaves? Indeed, this passage in the Declaration is both powerful and open to interpretation.

Regardless of one's interpretation, these ideas provide the basis for our Constitution and government. They represent American **ideals** – that is, they reflect the full vision of what America should be. They are worthy of close inspection.

Your Task

Consider the four key ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence – *equality*, *unalienable rights*, *consent of the governed*, and the *right to alter or abolish government*. Then write an essay which explains why three of these ideals are important to society, and why the fourth ideal is most important of all.

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Background Essay Questions

1. Who was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence?
2. What are the four parts of the Declaration of Independence?
3. Why is the second paragraph seen as such an important part of the Declaration?
4. What are unalienable rights? According to the Declaration of Independence, what rights fall into this category?
5. According to the Declaration of Independence, what is the purpose of government?
6. According to the Declaration of Independence, what should the people do when the government fails to fulfill its purpose?
7. Define these terms:
 - independence
 - grievances
 - ideals
 - self-evident
 - unalienable rights

Timeline

1754-1763 – French and Indian Wars

1773 – Tea Act, Boston Tea Party

1775 – Battles of Lexington and Concord

June 11-July 1, 1776 – Thomas Jefferson drafts the Declaration of Independence.

July 2, 1776 – The Continental Congress considers the Declaration of Independence.

July 4, 1776 – Continental Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence.

1783 – End of Revolutionary War

1787 – Constitution written and signed in Philadelphia

Document A

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

Source: Declaration of Sentiments, Women's Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, 1848.

Note: In July 1848, approximately 260 women and 40 men met in Seneca Falls, New York, for one of the first women's rights conventions. The convention adopted a "Declaration of Sentiments."

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... 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.

Source: Diana Pham, Chicago, IL, July 2012.

Note: Diana Pham and her husband, Vi Luu, arrived in Chicago in 1980 from refugee camps in Indonesia and Malaysia. Diana was recently asked what she appreciated most about her new country.

As immigrant boat people from communist Vietnam, we appreciate the opportunity given to us to build our lives in the United States. Our two daughters are just finishing their university education at Stanford and Michigan which would never have been possible without this country's belief in equality. My daughters, like other Americans, had an equal opportunity to succeed. America has given our family the chance to become whatever we choose to become.

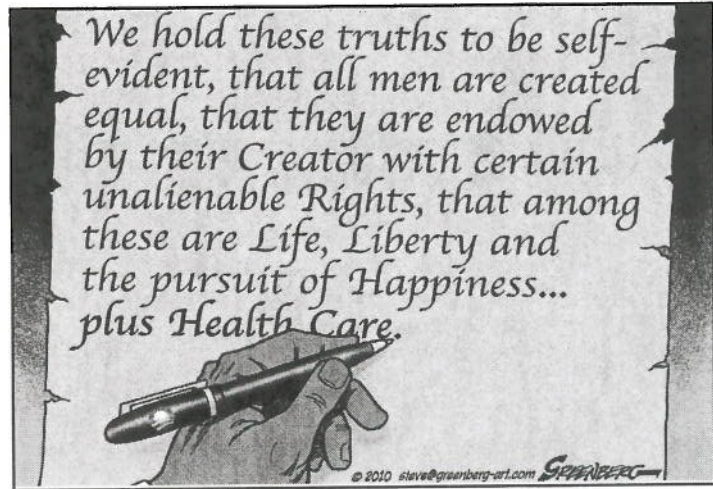
Document Analysis

1. Which of the four beliefs is highlighted in this document?
2. What do you think this principle meant to most Americans in 1776?
3. What does "men" mean to the 260 women and 40 men present at Seneca Falls?
4. What does "equality" mean to Diana Pham?
5. How might you use this document to argue that "equality" is the most important ideal in the Declaration of Independence?

Document B

... that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness ...

Source: Steve Greenberg, *VC Reporter*,
Ventura, CA, March 22, 2010.



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Source: Andrew Sullivan, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," *This I Believe*, National Public Radio, July 4, 2005.

I believe in life. I believe in treasuring it as a mystery...that should never be destroyed....

I believe in liberty. I believe that within every soul lies the [ability] to reach for its own good.... I believe in a system of government that places liberty at the center of its concerns.... I believe in the right to own property [and] to maintain it....

I believe in the pursuit of happiness. Not its attainment, nor its final definition, but its pursuit. I believe in the journey, not the arrival....

Document Analysis

1. Which of the four beliefs is the focus of this document?
2. In the cartoon, who is adding the words "plus Health Care" to the Declaration of Independence?
3. Why do you think Sullivan says he believes in the pursuit of happiness, rather than happiness itself? Do you agree with him?
4. Is it possible for a society to achieve equality without liberty?
5. Can a society achieve liberty without equality? Explain.
6. How might you use this document to argue that the unalienable right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness is the most important ideal in the Declaration of Independence?

Document C

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

Source: "Tiananmen Square Massacre 20 Years On," *The Telegraph* (UK).

Note: In the spring of 1989, Chinese university students and other protestors occupied Tiananmen Square in Beijing. They condemned government corruption and called for a change to democracy. The photograph shows demonstrating high school students. On June 4, the protests were crushed by the Chinese government. Up to 3,000 people were killed.



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Source: "The Consent of the Governed: Essential Principles." Democracy Web: Comparative Studies in Freedom.

"The most fundamental concept of democracy is the idea that government exists to secure the rights of the people and must be based on the consent of the governed....

"The essential meaning of consent of the governed can be better understood by examining countries where it is lacking. In 1989, Chinese students who had gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square adopted the Statue of Liberty... as the symbol of their demands for truth, freedom, and democracy from their government....

"The United States of America was the first modern state formed around the principle of consent of the governed. The term implies that the people of a country or territory... consent, in a [vote] or through elected representatives, to the establishment of their own government....

Document Analysis

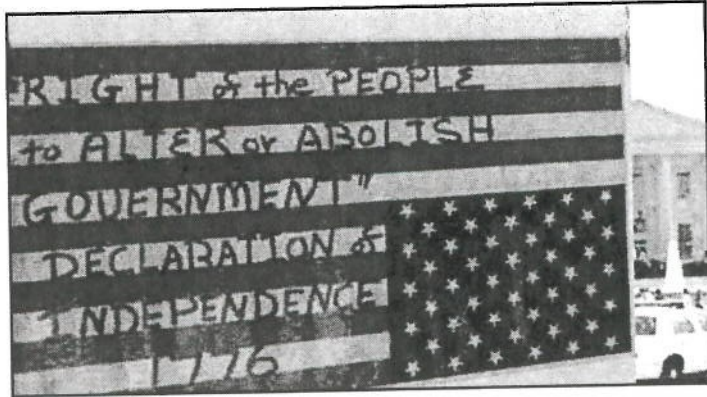
1. Which of the four ideals is the focus of this document?
2. Why did the students protest at Tiananmen Square? What was the result?
3. In a government based on the consent of the governed, who is the ultimate authority?
4. In a country like China, do you think it is possible to achieve liberty without the consent of the governed?
5. Can you achieve happiness without the consent of the governed?
6. How might you use this document to argue that "consent of the governed" is the most important ideal in the Declaration of Independence?

Document D

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it...

Source: Carol Moore Report, July 3, 2008.

Note: The photo is from the blog of an activist in the Vermont secession movement. This movement was launched in 2003 by people who were angry about the bigness of the federal government. The goal was to return Vermont to the independent status it had between 1777-1791, before it joined the Union. Traditionally, an upside-down flag was a distress signal for ships at sea.



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Source: "Declaration of Tea Party Independence," February 24, 2010.

Note: The Tea Party movement takes its name from the Boston Tea Party of the revolutionary era. Tea Party members believe in following the words and intent of the Declaration and the Constitution. They support a smaller government, lower taxes, and reduction of the national debt.

Declaration of Tea Party Independence

As the course of human events winds its way through History, it has found some paths lead to Tyranny and some to Liberty. In seeking a path to Liberty, a great and powerful movement is now rising from every corner of our land. Created by the Will of the American People, it rejects unconstitutional domination by the Government that is supposed to be its servant. This movement has arisen, in large part, because our elected officials have failed us....

Therefore, Individuals acting through the Tea Party Movement, seek to restore the policies, which are proven to safeguard liberty and prosperity for all. We will organize, demonstrate and vote until this restoration has been achieved.

Document Analysis

1. Which of the four beliefs is the focus of this document?
2. What is the overall message of this photograph?
3. What is the Tea Party?
4. What does the Tea Party hope to achieve – altering or abolishing the government? Give evidence to support your answer.
5. How might you use this documents to argue that “alter or abolish the government” is the most important ideal in the Declaration of Independence?
6. What is more important: equality or the right to alter or abolish one’s government?