

History Matters: American Revolutions

The American Revolution and The Declaration of Independence

We refer to the war American colonists fought for freedom in 1776 as the American Revolution. While that is true, it was also a global event. The American Revolution marked the spread of Enlightenment ideals to a new continent. A potent challenge to monarchical rule and the restrictions of social class, it represents the birth of a new form of government. With it, a new center of democracy was born in the Western World.

In this, we find that America is more than a nation; it is an idea and a promise to people everywhere. This promise, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, was heard around the globe, from grand palaces to isolated villages. Inspiring those who heard it, it fomented revolutions, terrified emperors, toppled kings, and elevated the common man.

The Declaration of Independence championed ideas that had been brewing in Europe for hundreds of years. However, with respect to acting on these ideas, America enjoyed several advantages over the Old World. Specifically, the colonies benefited from: a) a history of experimenting with collaborative government; b) an ocean separating them from the kings and armies they needed to resist; and c) the time needed to develop a unique culture of American independence in the citizens.

Unlike other countries at the time, America offered the promise of equality. That potential drew millions of hopeful immigrants eager to escape the limitations of the Old World. Today, those seeking freedom continue to see America as a beacon of hope.

The American Revolution created a new nation and a new way of governing. With it, America showed the world that self-governance and the peaceful passage of power are possible. Other countries' revolutions did not end the same way. The French and the English fought for the same principles, but these conflicts ended with a monarch on the throne. America ended their

revolution with George Washington as President, and he secured the revolution by refusing offers of unlimited power. He understood the ideas that had inspired the revolution—the ideas of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

How should we understand these ideas? Originating in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the expression "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is among the most famous in American history. This phrase encapsulates key Enlightenment ideals and serves as an important touchstone of American political philosophy. Let's look at what each component means:

1. Right to Life

- This right asserts that every person has an inherent right to live and not be unjustly deprived of their existence. It suggests that a person's life should be protected by the government and any infringement on this right—such as through unjust actions or policies—is a violation of the principles of justice and equality that the nation was founded upon. It underscores the idea that the protection of human life is a fundamental duty of government and an essential component of individual freedom.

2. Right to Liberty

- This right protects every person's right to live their life as they choose. It encompasses various aspects of personal freedom, including our freedom of speech and our freedom of religion, as well as our right to assemble and to petition the government, and it reflects the belief that every person should have the freedom to act according to their own will, as long as their actions do not infringe on the rights of others.
- This right also safeguards us against unwarranted interference or oppression by the government or others. The founding fathers were concerned about giving government the power to arrest, confine, and execute citizens. This right, therefore, offers protection against the exercise of arbitrary or unjust authority, ensuring that individuals are free from undue restraints.

3. Right to Pursuit of Happiness

- This right speaks to the idea that every person should be free to seek fulfillment, meaning, and satisfaction in their lives. This concept is rooted in the Enlightenment idea that individuals should be free to define and follow their own sense of purpose and satisfaction, as long as it does not infringe on the rights of their neighbors. In this sense, although government is not responsible for providing happiness, it is expected to create conditions that allow individuals the opportunity to pursue happiness for themselves. This includes protecting rights, ensuring justice, and maintaining public order.

The Declaration of Independence presented by Famous Celebrities:

<https://youtu.be/jpBok4A3FvU?si=BtCQFdKs0DEAISIQ>

The Civil War

The American Civil War has been referred to as the Second American Revolution. The war was the result of many complicated issues, most of which can be traced back to slavery existing in a country where equality and freedom were held as fundamental values. Slavery had been a point of passionate argument during the writing of the American Constitution, but the Founding Fathers failed to find a compromise that ended slavery and retained national unity. In the end, the Civil War was Americans' attempt to confront the issues of slavery and sectionalism decisively.

President Abraham Lincoln was faced with the momentous challenge of holding the Union together, a goal he set from the start of the war. As the conflict progressed, his rhetoric reflected his understanding that slavery was

at the heart of the nation's divisions. He recognized that there would be no way to preserve the nation as long as slavery persisted.

At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863, just four months after one of the bloodiest battles of the war, he gave a short speech in which he laid out a vision of an expanded American commitment to freedom. In this speech, he did not mention the preservation of the Union because he knew the terms of the conflict had been redefined by the scale of the sacrifice. Instead, he spoke about the endurance of a nation dedicated to liberty and equality. Lincoln pointed out that the world was watching the outcome of the American Civil War and that the survival of democracy rested on its outcome.

Presidents Read the Gettysburg Address:

https://youtu.be/So9o8evl5uQ?si=VTCm505K_3U-UkE0