

VIRTUAL NORTH AMERICAN STUDENT CONGRESS 2026

The Declaration of *Independence*

Balancing Ideals with Reality



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“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.”

— *Declaration of Independence, Philadelphia, 1776*

For 1776, these words were extraordinary. Monarchy was the norm. This was genuinely radical.

Three pillars that *shook the world*



Equality

All people created
equal in dignity

Radical in 1776

56

Delegates who signed



Natural Rights

Life, Liberty &
pursuit of Happiness

Inherent, inalienable

1776

Year ideas were codified



Consent

Power from the people,
not a king

First of its kind

250+

Years still being debated

When the words didn't *match the world*



Slavery persisted

~40% of signers were enslavers. The institution continued for 89 more years after "all men are created equal" was written.



Women excluded

"All men" was literal. Women could not vote or own property freely for over 144 years after independence.



Indigenous peoples

The Declaration itself described Indigenous peoples with a deeply offensive slur. Their lands were systematically taken.



A narrow 'people'

Consent applied only to white, male, property-owning colonists. Everyone else was excluded from the circle of rights.

These are not footnotes. They are the gap between written ideals and lived reality — enormous, painful, and generational.

What we see *from the north*

us UNITED STATES

- 1776 — Declaration of Independence
- 1775–83 — Revolutionary War
- Contradictions built into foundation
- 1865 — Abolition (89 years later)
- 1920 — Women's suffrage
- 1964 — Civil Rights Act
- Ongoing: closing the gap

↔
shared
struggle

CANADA

- 1867 — Confederation via BNA Act
- No revolution — negotiated path
- Residential schools — our failure
- Systemic racism — ongoing reckoning
- 1982 — Charter of Rights & Freedoms
- Truth & Reconciliation process
- Ongoing: same unfinished work

"Both nations share the same core challenge: making the words on paper mean something real for every person — not just the privileged, not just the majority, but everyone."

Progress is possible — *but never automatic*



1776

The Standard Is Set

Equality & liberty proclaimed — but applied only to white, male, property-owning colonists. The words would outlive their authors' intentions.



1865

13th Amendment

Abolitionists used the Declaration as their argument. 89 years after 'all men are created equal,' slavery is abolished.



1920

19th Amendment

Suffragettes echoed the Declaration: 'all men AND women are created equal.' Women vote — 144 years after independence.



1964

Civil Rights Act

Dr. King called the Declaration a 'promissory note.' Nearly 200 years later, legal equality for Black Americans is won.



Today

Still Unfinished

Racial inequality, Indigenous rights, economic gaps remain. Our generation's responsibility to close the gap further.

What *we* can do — right now



Learn & Know

- › Read primary sources yourself
- › Study voices left out of history
- › Attend congresses like this one



Speak & Write

- › Write an op-ed or essay
- › Have the hard conversations
- › Use social media intentionally



Organise & Act

- › Register to vote the moment eligible
- › Join or start an equity club
- › Contact your elected representatives



Connect & Build

- › Build relationships across difference
- › Join the NAEIF Steering Committee
- › Mentor younger students

The words survived their *authors' intentions*

THE YOUTH PLEDGE

"I pledge to learn honestly, speak courageously, and act with empathy — to close the gap between declared ideals and lived reality, one conversation, one vote, one act of service at a time."



Ideals work — even imperfect ones



Progress happens through struggle



The work belongs to us now

Sources & *Further Reading*

PRIMARY SOURCES

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3 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

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4 Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" (1963)

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BOOKS (NAEIF LIST)

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Beacon Press

6 Hannah-Jones — The 1619 Project (2021)

One World / Random House

7 Gorsuch & Nitze — Heroes of 1776 (2026)

Traditional perspective · on NAEIF reading list

8 Wilkerson — Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent (2020)

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ACADEMIC SOURCES

9 Gilder Lehrman Institute — Declaration in Global Perspective

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10 Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada — Final Report (2015)

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11 Fordham Law — The Declaration at 250 (2026)

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12 Smithsonian NMAAHC — Douglass Speech Archive

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