

The Declaration of Independence: Balancing Ideals with Reality

The Pursuit of Civil Discourse
North American Educational
Initiatives Foundation

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Question:

As an American student with a traditional historical perspective, what do you think about the American Declaration of Independence and its balancing of ideals with reality?

Answer:

- Exemplifies American core ideals
- It is flexible to set precedents for future fights for equality.
- Although the United States has had major struggles with balancing the ideals with reality.

Why it matters:

This question matters because it helps people connect the ideals of the founding fathers with the societal reality of the world.





Core Values:

- Natural Rights
 - Rights that are inherent for all – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness
- Consent of the Governed
 - Government power comes from the people not a monarchy – popular sovereignty.
- All men are created equal
 - Equality is given to everyone regardless of status, background and wealth.

These values are crucial because they establish the foundation for democracy, protect individual freedoms, and justify the establishment of a government that serves its people rather than oppresses them.

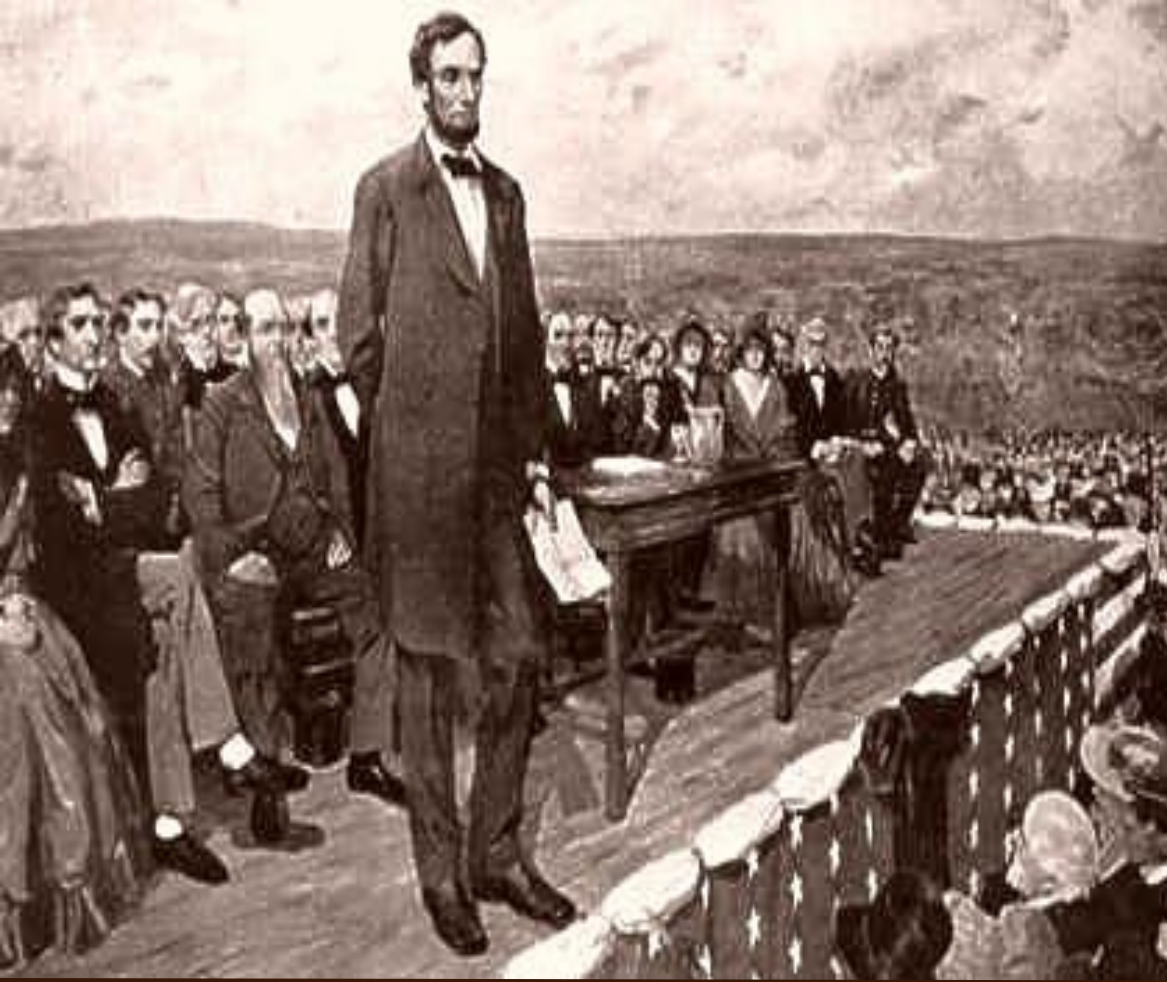


Antebellum Period (1815-1861):

- Slavery and racial hierarchy
- Limited political rights for minorities
 - Women, African-Americans, Native Americans, ect.
- Native American removal and suppression

The Gaps between the Ideals and Practice:

The antebellum period did not “follow” the Declaration of Independence because the nation’s growth and legal framework were built on compromises that preserved slavery, traditional, and racial values, while the Declaration’s ideals were selectively applied. This contradiction between the nation’s founding principles and its evolving reality created the sectional tensions that eventually led to the Civil War



Societal use of the document:

- Abolitionists
- Abraham Lincoln
 - Emancipation Proclamation and Abolishment of Slavery
- Women's suffrage
- Civil Rights Movement/Activists
 - MLK, Malcom X, March to Washington

Advancements of society through the document:

- This exemplifies that the Declaration of Independence set a moral foundation for abolitionists, women's suffrage movement, and civil rights movement in order to push for greater equality among society. They used the principals to confront and demand that the country lives up to its own standards.

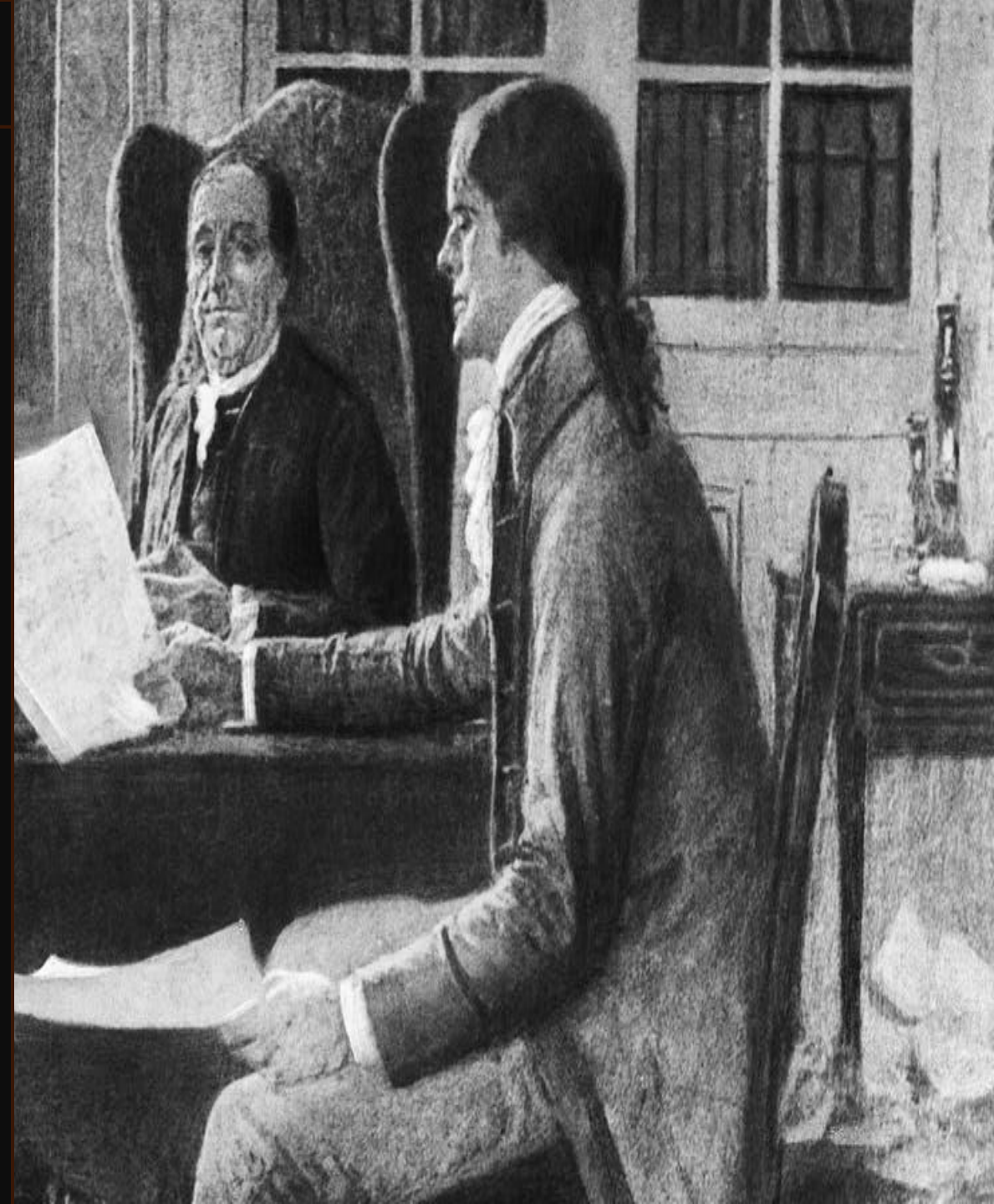


Critiques to the Declaration:

- Racial/Gender inequality
- Self-interpretation
- Historical Context
- Political objectivation

Summary:

Therefore, critics argue that since the Declaration of Independence was written in a period where racial/gender inequality was accepted, the self-interpreted document allowed for politicians to use it for their own purposes. When viewed from a historical lense, the document reflected and was used more for political purposes rather than equality among all people.





Ideals and Reality:

- The Declaration is both inspiring and imperfect, expressing universal ideals that the nation did not yet live up to in throughout history.
- A traditional perspective sees the ideals as genuine, even if they were unrealized at the time.
- The tension between ideals and reality drives American reform, shaping movements from abolition to civil rights.



Today:

People in the United States still use the document philosophy to argue for:

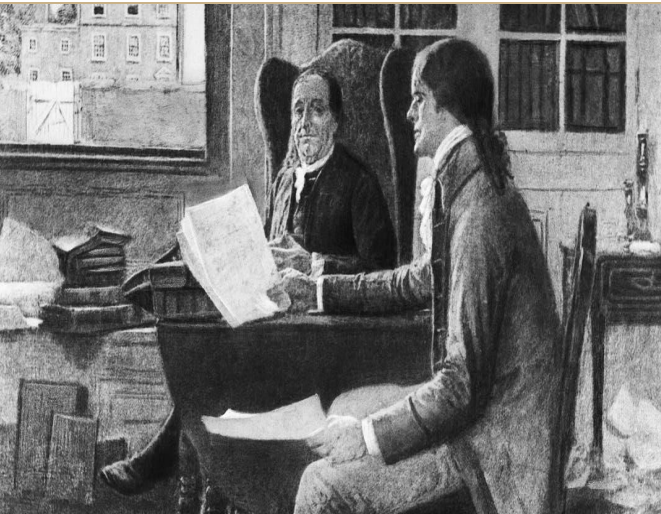
- Racial Justice
- Gender equality
- LGBTQ+ rights
- Indigenous sovereignty
- Voting rights

The document is also used as guides in courts through interpretation, it is implemented in primary school's curriculum and serves as a national identity statement for the United States.

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The Declaration of Independence established America's core ideals of equality, natural rights, and consent of the governed. Although during that time the traditional/political societal views limited the meaning of equality as it expand to all citizens. However, over time, movements such as abolition, emancipation, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights Movement used those same ideals to push the country closer to justice. Understanding the tension between America's founding ideals and its imperfect reality shows how each generation has worked to fulfill the promise first made in the Declaration. Today, ongoing debates about voting rights, racial justice, Indigenous sovereignty, etc. continue to draw on the Declaration's ideals as Americans argue over equality in society.





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Thank you!

