

## Fact or Fiction: Is the Declaration of Independence Truly Followed Today?

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Thomas Jefferson most famously 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 these are among life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” in the Declaration of Independence, and it has had a forever-lasting impact on Americans ever since. The question is, has the impact been positive or negative, linear or cyclical over the last 250 years? How has it affected Americans over the last 250 years? Are the words, meanings, and goals still relevant today as they were 250 years ago? The Declaration is a reminder that Americans have rights others do not, rights that we take for granted. We are fortunate to participate in government and to have these “unalienable rights” embedded in us as citizens of this nation. The rights we were given to set a standard that continues to shape how Americans understand justice and fairness today, as it did 250 years ago. At that time, the Declaration was not only an efficient summary of American political thought but also a careful rhetorical balancing of contending views (Lutz 1989). As debates continue over voting rights, equality, and the role of government, the document’s core message, that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed remains essential. However, many would argue that the truths protected under the Declaration are not what the world today truly perceives them to be.

When the Declaration of Independence was written 250 years ago, America was moving toward independence from Great Britain as a nation of only 13 colonies. Originally, the Articles of Confederation were enacted to govern the nation. Still, they proved ineffective, creating a weak central government and lacking the power to enforce laws and maintain a standing army. So, the Founding Fathers joined forces and collaborated to draft the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's account reflects three stages in the life of the Declaration: the document originally written by Jefferson; the changes to that document made by Franklin and Adams, resulting in the version that was submitted by the Committee of Five to the Congress; and the version that was eventually adopted on July 4, 1776. On July 9, the action of Congress was officially approved by the New York Convention, which had now secured the approval of all 13 colonies. Over the next few centuries, the nation whose birth was announced in a Declaration was to show immense growth in size, population, economic power, and social complexity, and to undergo continuous testing and strengthening of its democracy (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration 2018).

Anna Tsing’s novel, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, challenges the idea that history is a steady path of improvement through introducing the concept of precarity, or unstable and unpredictable living conditions. In the first chapter specifically, she critiques the idea that history is a smooth path of improvement. Rather, Tsing emphasizes uncertainty, fragmentation, and unpredictability in global systems. One prime example of this in U.S. history is with the segregation of African Americans and, in general, people of color being accepted in society. The era of segregation, with the Civil War, Jim Crow laws, and the Civil Rights Movement, is one of the most historical and important “bumpy roads” in American history that ended in an outcome that was sufficient at the time. However, it could also be argued that it remains an issue today. Now, the movement towards the ultimate equality for African Americans is called the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Another example of racial inequality is the culture behind discrimination against people of Asian descent, whether it was with the Japanese Internment

camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 during WWII, or in more recent times, with those of Chinese descent being excluded from society because of the American public blaming them for the COVID pandemic spreading to our nation. Not only did racial inequality exist in the past and present, but similarly with gender inequality, with women not being accepted the same way as men, in addition to immigrants, which is a very pressing issue today.

Segregation formally began with the Civil War (1861–65), during which 11 southern states seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. The differing economies of the North and South prompted the extension of slavery and eventually led to what some historians consider the “first modern war” (McPherson 2008). However, segregation did not end there but continued to last with the creation of Jim Crow laws in the South, which enforced racial segregation. This era lasted between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. At the beginning of this era, laws were passed requiring the separation of whites from “persons of color” in public transportation and schools but soon grew to all public places. It was codified at the local and state levels, and most famously in the “separate but equal” decision of the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (National Geographic Society 2022). At the end of the era, in the 1950s, the American Civil Rights Movement began against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern US. Its roots were in resisting racial oppression and abolishing the institution of slavery. Although enslaved people were emancipated because of the Civil War and were then granted basic civil rights through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, struggles to secure federal protection of these rights persisted for the next century and continue to this day (Branch 2025). In the present day, African American citizens have created the BLM movement to draw attention to the many ways in which Black people are treated unfairly in society and how institutions, laws, and policies help circulate that unfairness. The BLM movement gained remarkable influence in May 2020 when George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was pronounced dead after Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, knelt on Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes, despite Floyd’s repeated protests that he could not breathe (Library of Congress 2015).

The mentality of not accepting all different kinds of people continued with the Japanese Intermittent camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, during WWII and in more recent times, we continue the non-acceptance of people from Asia with people of Chinese descent due to the COVID pandemic. After the Japanese empire bombed America’s naval base in Pearl Harbor in the Pacific Ocean between the two nations, American citizens of Japanese descent were viewed with distrust and hostility. Soon, it was presented that Japanese citizens posed a serious threat to our nation. On February 6, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War and military commanders to designate military areas from which any or all persons could be excluded. This became the groundwork for the relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps, as it represented the increased anti-Japanese sentiment occurring across, particularly, the West Coast of the US, where many Japanese immigrants lived. This led to the forced removal and internment of over 110,000 Japanese Americans due to wartime hysteria and racial bias (Hardy 2024). Racism towards those of Asian descent only continued to the present day, with an increase in Anti-Chinese sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting as a considerable spike in overt violence and hatred directed at Asian American individuals. Soon after COVID-19 began spreading in the U.S., then-President Trump and the Republican Party began an effort to blame China for the virus by using phrases like ‘China virus’ and ‘Kung Flu’ to describe the

coronavirus, in contradiction to World Health Organization (WHO) guidance (Huang, Krupenkin, Rothschild, and Cunningham 2023).

The Declaration of Independence famously states that “all men are created equal,” but to what extent is this true? Real racial issues this country faces have never actually been solved or fixed, even with the protests, national movements, and the passing of laws. Unfortunately, racism has managed to persist since the creation of this nation that is supposed to be equal with the unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Not every citizen can say they feel like these rights are encouraged or maintained, even though they are guaranteed to every American citizen. The declaration of these rights has been disputed over centuries. When the clause is taken literally, “all men are created equal,” it is not true: “If we say they are created equal before the law, it is true of the American citizen, but it was not recognized as true at that time for the colored race held in slavery. If we say it referred to equality of rights or to civil and political equality, it was true. Still, it was not applied to all men, for most of all the colonies had a class of people who were not recognized as having any civil or political rights” (Webster 1902). This alludes to the fact that African Americans weren’t treated as real citizens, even though they were, leading to the division of the 13 colonies between the North and South with different economies, one relying on slavery, with the other trying to make progress towards industrialization. Although in modern times Americans have one nation, for those who are not white, people still do not feel 100 percent accepted and are still fighting for the equal rights they deserve and stated for ALL the people in our free nation.

Not only do the racial inequalities make one question the Declaration, but it also connects to America’s immigration policies and how the Declaration makes immigrants feel. When gaining independence from Britain and creating the Declaration of Independence, the Founding Fathers did not want America to operate like the British government or under a monarchy, and renounced their allegiance to King George III by declaring that, “he has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither” (Somin 2021). The people of the colonies did not appreciate the King's efforts to restrict immigration to Britain's American colonies and deemed it a step towards absolute tyranny. Additionally, Thomas Jefferson wrote, in 1781, that "It has been the wise policy of these states to extend the protection of their laws to all those who should settle among them of whatever nation or religion they might be and to admit them to a participation of the benefits of civil and religious freedom” (Somin 2021). With that said, one of the Founding Fathers and a prime author of the Declaration, believed that the American nation was created with the intention of being a haven for people of all kinds. Although he believed this, why did he not officially declare those words in the Declaration? In what he has stated in the Declaration, did Jefferson intend for his belief to be assumed, or did he allude to it at any point? The U.S. was founded on liberal principles, as the Declaration states in the famous phrase that “all men are created equal and have the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But these principles cannot be met if their parentage and place of birth limit people. The principles the Founding Fathers fought for contradict what we today call the hereditary aristocracy of citizenship, meaning that only those born to the right parents or in the right place have a right to live in the United States (Somin 2021).

There is even a gender bias in which women had to fight to be equal to men. The American public took the words “all men are created equal” too literally and did not include women in democratic practices like voting, leading to the beginning of the women's rights movement in 1848, which later gave rise to the women's suffrage movement. Both the women’s

rights and suffrage movements provided political experience for many of the early women pioneers in Congress. Famously, Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848, where about 300 women gathered to outline a direction for the women's rights movement. At this convention, Stanton called for the "Declaration of Sentiments," which echoed the Declaration of Independence in saying "we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." This illustrates that women clearly had to fight for themselves to be seen as equals by the American government. Even though the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified by the states in 1870, declared that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," the electorate was not willing to support women's suffrage. By 1890, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) formed as a nonpartisan organization focused on gaining the vote in the states as a precursor to a federal suffrage amendment. The women's suffrage movement finally ended with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, giving women the right to vote (U.S. House of Representatives 2006). Even today, modern women are not equal to men, an example being how women only make only 77 cents for every dollar men earn, even when they do comparable work. This even coincides with gender inequalities: in the U.S., Hispanic women earned 57.5 cents for every dollar in 2022, while Black women made 69.1 cents (Soken-Huberty 2024).

Between racial inequalities, immigrants being treated as aliens, and women fighting to be equal to men, can we really say, "all men are created equal... with certain unalienable rights that are among life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"? The Founding Fathers had good intentions when creating the Declaration of Independence; they did not want newly independent American colonies to operate under a set of laws or government like the British monarchy. However, they did not know how their Declaration would be perceived. They were unaware of the fact that people of a different skin color, place of origin, or gender would not be considered as "equal" to the white man. Instead, everyone else was considered inferior, and the Declaration's rights didn't apply to them. African Americans were "property" of white men until an Amendment to the Constitution was put in place banning slavery. Yet, they still feel out of place in society due to the intense racism that plagues our nation, leading to the current Black Lives Matter movement. Even with anti-Asian propaganda with the Japanese Internment Camps and excluding them from society because of the WWII attack on Pearl Harbor, never leaving this nation with the continuation during the COVID-19 pandemic, blaming the Chinese for the virus. Now, immigrants are treated as "aliens" to society, and especially in recent times, many are being forcefully and wrongfully removed from the nation. Women, too, had to face the wrath of gender inequality, not being allowed to vote or participate in society until an amendment was passed allowing them to do so. However, today, women still struggle to make the same amount of money as men for jobs of comparable worth. Accordingly, I do not find truth in the Founding Fathers' notion that "all men are created equal with certain unalienable rights." What has America done to advance the cause of democracy since 1776? Two-hundred and fifty years after the Declaration's signing, the nation does not reflect the values embodied in that statement made in the late eighteenth century.

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