

PROJECT TITLE: We Hold these Truths	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

- Primary Investigative Question(s)** – This project will focus on one sentence from the declaration of Independence: “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.”

What were the sources of the ideas set forth in this statement, about which Thomas Jefferson said, “was intended to be an expression of the American mind”?

Furthermore, what impact have these words had on the rest of the world as democracies have developed?

- Contextual Essay** –

Introduction:

“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.” This sentence from the Declaration of Independence in only 35 words crystallizes America's beliefs about equality and human rights. It is important to recognize, however, that this definitive American statement has deep roots in Europe. Also, in the years since the Declaration of Independence, this statement has provided the inspiration for many advances in human rights not only in America but throughout the world. Jefferson himself said of the Declaration of Independence,

“Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.” ¹

The Declaration of Independence funnels statements about human rights into one succinct sentence that has hence inspired people in America and all over the world to claim rights that are naturally theirs simply because they are humans. It was instrumental in the abolishing of American slavery and in securing woman's suffrage, and it has played a role in the establishment of new democracies all over the world.

In ancient times, the Greeks developed the idea of democracy – rule by the people. The Romans developed “representative democracy,” more often called republic. Thucydides, a Greek historian, said his speech at the funeral of Pericles in 429 BC, “Our government favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all.” ² This speech embodies the will of Greek democracy. It includes the principles of equal justice

for all, rule by the people, and the rule of law which later became known as American republican ideals. Jefferson and every other educated Colonial American would have studied this speech as well as other writings about ancient democracy.

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth century European movement which focused on reason and included the ideas of natural human rights. Jefferson and his contemporaries were greatly influenced by the writings of many Enlightenment philosophers, most notably the English philosopher John Locke. He wrote in 1690, "Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." Many U.S. colonial documents contained wording such as this including the *Virginia Declaration of Rights*; written by George Mason in 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, 1776; and Thomas Jefferson's *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, 1774.

However ancient the idea of democracy, and despite the popularity of Enlightenment ideas, the history of Europe is a history of monarchies and aristocracies rather than democracies. Jefferson and his contemporaries knew that. The "divine right of kings" was a popular idea among the royalty. European kings believed that they were ordained by God to be above everyone else. They did not believe that all men are created equal.

King James I (of Jamestown fame) wrote these words in 1598. "Kings were the authors and makers of the laws, and not the laws of the kings... And as ye see it manifest that the King is overlord of the whole land, so is he master over every person that inhabiteth the same, having power over the life and death of every one of them."⁴

English citizens in 1689 wrote an English Bill of Rights "Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject." Their country was ruled by a king, but they asserted rights that the king could not over step. The document states that the English people, "do claim, demand and insist upon ... their undoubted rights and liberties."⁵

In Europe, Enlightenment ideas of human rights were an interesting topic of discussion, but centuries of class society and aristocratic domination made these equal rights less than a reality. In America however, Enlightenment ideas found fresh soil allowing the seeds to blossom. There was no royalty. The Americans would not stand for that. Yes, there were people who brought titles from England and were given special grants by the king, but America was the "land of opportunity." There was plenty of land and plenty of opportunity for a person to rise above the distinctions from England. Of course, even though eighteenth century Americans had managed to leave the idea of royalty behind, they did have other prejudices which blocked the way for true equality for all its citizens, most notably against African-Americans and women. Even though the Founding Fathers were not able to secure the "blessings of liberty" to these omitted groups, they were men of vision. They knew they were establishing a system in which liberty would be expanded to include all Americans. As America grew, so would its understanding of this founding statement that the founders had the foresight to include in its official document establishing it as a nation, The Declaration of Independence.

Abraham Lincoln claimed that all his political ideas "spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." He stated in a speech given at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, February 22, 1861 that:

*It was not the mere separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment of the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence.*⁶

As previously excluded Americans claimed their equal status, this wonderful sentence provided inspiration and voice. Orators of the woman's suffrage movement drew from it. The famous sentence was oft quoted with one addition, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal."⁷ Susan B. Anthony was arrested for voting in an election. In her defense she stated these words:

"Our democratic-republican government is based on the idea of the natural right of every individual member thereof to a voice and a vote in making and executing the laws. We assert the province of government to be to secure the people in the enjoyment of their unalienable rights."⁸

African Americans clung to the promises of this sentence as all America rallied to the famous speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. identifying these words from the Declaration of Independence as an American Creed. "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'" Even though most of the framers were not able to see that equality for all includes African-Americans, their words provided a sword to slice through the bonds of slavery and prejudice. Once again, Jefferson's words gave voice to Americans treated unequally.

The legacy of our Declaration of Independence has reached far beyond America's borders. Shortly after our own revolution, the French rose up against their monarchy. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was primarily authored by the Marquis de Lafayette, a personal friend of Jefferson who was in France at the time. This French document states, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."⁹

This widely quoted and invoked sentence has reached over the world. Since 1776, over 100 countries have written Declarations of Independence, many quoting directly from our own. Space does not permit a complete list, but some notable examples are: Venezuela 1811, New Zealand 1835, Liberia 1847, Czechoslovak Nations 1918, and Vietnam 1945.¹¹ Perhaps the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 could be used as a symbol for the resolve of people all over the globe to secure equal rights for all. The preamble of this document begins with these words, "*Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,*"¹⁰ This document has been translated into 375 languages. Eleanor Roosevelt, who was chairman of the committee that authored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights compared this document to the Magna Charta, The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the United States Bill of Rights and expressed a hope that it would have the same effect on the world that those documents had had in their own countries.¹²

Conclusion: The Declaration of Independence, in declaring the inalienable rights of all gave succinct form to centuries of developing philosophy and then propelled that statement into the modern age giving voice to people all over the globe who are seeking to claim basic human rights.

Notes—

(1) Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 5, 1825, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (1892-1899), vol. 10, p. 343. ["TO HENRY LEE - Thomas Jefferson The Works, vol. 12 \(Correspondence and Papers 1816-1826; 1905\)".](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=808&chapter=88496&layout=html&Itemid=27) The Online Library of Liberty. May 8, 1825. http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=808&chapter=88496&layout=html&Itemid=27. Retrieved 2008-03-08.

(2) Thucydides, funeral oration of Pericles in 429 BC. This famous speech is often quoted to show the Greek concept of democracy. <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/greekfeatures/a/democracythucyd.htm>

- (3) Locke, John (1690). *Two Treatises of Government* (10th edition). You can read this at [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/trgov10h.htm). <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/trgov10h.htm>. Retrieved January 21, 2009.
- (4) King James I, "*True Law of Free Monarchies*", 1598. This is the same king of the King James Bible. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/james1-trew2.html>
- (5) English Bill of Rights or "Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject, and Settling the Succession of the Crown" 1689. <http://www.jacobite.ca/documents/16891216.htm>
- (6) [Lincoln, Abraham, speech given at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, February 22, 1861](http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/popup_lincoln.html)
http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/popup_lincoln.html
- (7) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Declaration of Sentiments*, Seneca Falls, New York, July 1848.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/senecafalls.html>
- (8) Anthony, Susan B. June, 1873 <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/naw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28rbnawsan2152div13%29%29>
- (9) ***Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen***
<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/declaration.html>
- (10) Universal Declaration of Human rights <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>
- (11) Armitage, David, "The Declaration of Independence in World Context" *America on the World Stage: A Global Approach to American History*. Organization of American Historians. Edited by Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson pg. 18-28.
- (12) American Rhetoric. *Eleanor Roosevelt: On the Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This site has pictures of E. Roosevelt and an audio recording of her speech.
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/eleanorrooseveltdclarationhumanrights.htm>