



# CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

# The Promise of the Declaration

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.



To learn about the sacrifices made for freedom in the founding of the United States and the values on which this country was founded, one should look to the Declaration of Independence. Reviewing this text is a good reminder of the solemn pledge the signers agreed to by affixing their names to the document.

A fun fact that some may not know is the Declaration of Independence was signed on August 2, 1776, not July 4 as many think. Imagine hearing these final words read aloud by the secretary of the Continental Congress:

*"And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."*

Think about what they are pledging. They are willing to give up everything that was most important to them, in order to pursue the just cause of independence. Remember, the signers claimed that one of the most basic roles of government is to protect the natural rights of individuals.



The Declaration describes the specific natural rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These rights are unalienable (cannot be taken away by government). The natural right to life means that individuals, and not the government, have control over their lives. Liberty means individuals have the right to be free. Being free would later be more fully explained in the Bill of Rights with ideas that included freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of peaceable assembly, freedom of religious exercise, and freedom to petition the government. Finally, "the pursuit of happiness" is whatever individuals define as making them happy. Individuals have the right to try to achieve goals that will lead to their personal happiness. Limits on these rights exist when one person tries to interfere, or limits, the natural rights of another.

According to the Declaration of Independence, government does not give individuals these natural rights. Individuals are born with these rights, and government protects these rights with the consent of the governed. Government, then, gets its power from the people who are being

governed. Government becomes tyrannical when the government becomes oppressive and does not protect the rights of the people. If this happens, the people have the right to "alter or abolish" the government (change or replace it with another government).

This was something that had never been done before. To ensure their promise was not empty, the signers let the world know that they were committed to ensuring that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were the key principles upon which their nation would be built.

**To Think and To Do:** In his "The American Promise" special address to Congress, on March 15, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson stated: "This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: 'All men are created equal'--'government by consent of the governed'--'give me liberty or give me death.' Well, those are not just clever words, or those are not just empty theories. In their name Americans have fought and died for two centuries, and tonight around the world they stand there as guardians of our liberty, risking their lives."

Review the main ideas laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Based on these ideas, how would you define the purpose of our nation? Are we living up to the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence?

## LEARN MORE about the Declaration of Independence.

View the Students Investigating Primary Sources, Celebrate Freedom Week Lesson Series (Free registration may be required):

- [Decoding the Declaration](#)
- [Intentions for Independence](#)
- [Rhetoric of Revolution](#)
- [Forward to the Future](#)



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