

The Promises of America's Founding Documents

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 first to the Declaration of Independence. Reviewing this text is a good reminder of the risks the signers took by affixing their names to the document. 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* 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 as being unalienable, meaning they cannot be taken away by any 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 each individual defines as pursuing a good life and making them happy. Individuals have the right to try to achieve goals that will lead to their personal happiness. Of course, limits on these rights exist when one person tries to interfere with, or limit, 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; the purpose of government is to protect these rights, with the consent of the governed. Government, then, gets its power from the people who are being governed. Government becomes tyrannical when it becomes oppressive and loses

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sight of its purpose: protecting the rights of the people. If this happens, the people have the right to “alter or abolish” the government, that is, change or replace it with another government.

A nation created to protect natural rights was something new in the world, and it was up to the Founders, and those that followed, to continue to define and live up to the promises of the Declaration. The U.S. Constitution directly expands on the ideas of the Declaration, with its Preamble stating: *“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America”*.

The Constitution is at the core of everything. Yes, the Declaration provides the philosophical founding principles, but it is the Constitution which forms the foundation of our government and puts into practice those founding principles laid out so plainly in the Declaration. The principles of which Jefferson speaks, life, liberty, happiness, equality, and consent are integrated into the language and structure of our national constitution. This document is not only a framework for governance, but a path towards preserving the liberty at the heart of our constitutional republic.

These documents have been further expanded on in the more than two centuries since their inception. The Founders recognized and acknowledged the imperfections of these documents and the contradictions that existed between the words and certain elements of American society, but noted that some compromises had to be made in order to keep the states together. But the precedence is laid. The Constitution grants the powers and arranges them in a way to live up to the Declaration. This has inspired succeeding generations of Americans to keep expanding the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness over time as we continue to push towards a *more perfect union*.

What role did the founding documents have on setting precedent for the future granting of rights?