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“All Men Are Created Equal”: Founding Principles, Contradictions, and Idealism in U.S.

History

2013 NEH Institute Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character and Public Life

**Purpose Overview:**

“Thomas Jefferson survives,” were famously some of John Adams’ last words. These men died exactly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence. What of Jefferson and his language survives? Given that the Declaration of Independence, as a foundational American document, uses broad, sweeping and even enigmatic language on liberty and equality, the issue of the interpretation and analysis of this document in some context can inspire curiosity towards the study of American history. Questions of definitions, beliefs, expectations, and of, as historian David Blight said, “the dimensions of black freedom” are central to the discussion of American government and citizenship. This bridging unit will help students explore these themes by reviewing selected documents from before, during, and after the American Revolution as a prelude to study of the Civil War. Several pieces of Jefferson’s writing will be used to analyze founding principles and illuminate key areas for discussion.

**Students and Setting:**

This college preparatory survey course examines cultural, political and economic themes in U.S. History. Composition, seminar discussions, and oral presentations are emphasized, along with expectations of high academic standards. Students will already

have completed a Constitutional Review Unit early in the year. After this Jefferson – focused bridging unit, they will pick up their survey of U.S. History with the Civil War and Reconstruction. The length of class periods is 56 minutes. The students are in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and are typically reading at that level.

**Skill Objectives:**

Students will

- Analyze primary sources using the APPARTS format
- Deliver effective oral presentations
- Participate and cooperate with peers in student-centered activities and Student-

Led Discussions

**Content Objectives:**

Students will

- Identify and explain the founding principles as expressed in the Declaration of Independence
- Analyze Jefferson’s accusations against the King of England as expressed in the Declaration of Independence
- Distinguish between primary and secondary sources and use both to learn about a period in history
- Assess Jefferson’s role in establishing religious freedom in America
- Compare principles expressed in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom with guarantees in the First Amendment to the Constitution

- Evaluate the influence of the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence on America today
- Identify issues faced by Americans today that are similar to those faced by Americans of the founding era.

Common Core:

*Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*

**9.** Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.

**9.** Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

**Instructional Process:**

**D) Lesson 1 Engagement**

A. Warm up “hook” question: *What are the principles on which our government is based?*

Students discuss this question as a warm-up after their prior unit reviewing the Constitution.

B. Students and teacher review new packets and expectations for the upcoming Student Led Discussion (SLD). The packet is in the section below in this unit labeled “Packet and Questions for Seminar discussion” on page 6. Students should be given the packet *at least* two days in advance of the seminar discussion.

C. Teacher reviews APPARTS section of the packet with the class and assigns student groups. The 6 groups will begin to analyze an assigned document to present their APPARTS questions to the class the next day.

Homework: Students will read and annotate all documents with at least ten comments in the margins. Each group completes the APPARTS section for their assignment to present the document analysis to the class the next day. Students will review definitions of empire, principles, colony, primary and secondary sources.

## **II. Lesson 2 - Group Work to Analyze the Documents Continues**

A. Warm-up: Class reviews expectations for APPARTS. Students then rejoin groups.

B. APPARTS notes have been completed within the group. Each group presents the document analysis of their assigned document to the class, while other students take notes. Questions and clarifications prepare students for the seminar discussion the next day.

C. Students then return to their regular seats, and as a class, read aloud and clarify the discussion questions.

Homework: Discussion questions; typed responses. Students will not know until the day of the SLD which questions they will be expected to respond to orally, so they must respond to all of them in preparation.

### **Lesson 3 – Student-Led Discussion (SLD)**

A. Warm –up:

Students take out their packets and responses from homework. Reviewing definitions of empire, principles, colony, primary and secondary sources. The teacher will clarify any other key terms that students need re-defined or explained.

B. Students and teacher organize seats into a large circle in the room and review aloud the expectations for the SLD before beginning the discussion.

**C. Assessment:** Students each speak at least once, thoroughly and audibly responding to a selected discussion question or a relevant point by another student. Students submit their full packets with annotations, notes, and their typed responses at the end of the seminar.

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### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Unit Author**

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**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Packet and Questions for Seminar discussion**

“All Men Are Created Equal”: Founding Principles, Contradictions, and Idealism in U.S.

History

**Index of Documents for Seminar discussion**

Primary Sources

Document A. Excerpt from: Thomas Jefferson, A SUMMARY VIEW OF THE RIGHTS OF BRITISH AMERICA, 1774.

Document B. Excerpt from: "African Slavery in America," *The Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, March 8, 1775.

Document C. Excerpt from: Declaration of Independence, 1776.

Document D. Excerpt from: Thomas Jefferson, "An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom," Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. 16 January 1786. Manuscript.

Document E. Abraham Lincoln: Gettysburg Address, November, 1863.

Secondary source

Document F. Dr. Jan Lewis Interview, PBS.org.

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## **USING “APPARTS” TO ANALYZE DOCUMENTS**

To understand history or politics it is essential that you learn to critically examine significant documents. APPARTS is an "easy to remember" acronym for the following:

### **AUTHOR**

What do you know about the author? What is the author's point of view?

### **PLACE AND TIME**

Where and when was the source produced? How might this affect the meaning of the source?

### **PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

Beyond information about the author and the context of its creation, what do you know that would help you further understand the primary source?

### **AUDIENCE**

For whom was the source created and how might this affect the reliability of the source?

### **REASON**

Why was this source produced at the time it was produced?

### **THE MAIN IDEA**

What main point is the source trying to convey? What is the central message of the document?

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

Why is this source important? What inferences can you draw from this document? Ask yourself, "So what?" What should a student of history or politics take away from the analysis of this document?

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Student Led Discussion (SLD): The discussion will begin with Question #1 in your packet and will move around the entire circle in order first. Once each person has had a chance to speak, then individuals may call on one another. You will not know until the day of the SLD which questions you will be expected to respond to, so please respond to all of them in preparation. Also, as a reminder, you will complete the APPARTS section in preparation for the guiding questions and the SLD. The packet will be turned in at the end of the SLD.

**Guiding questions directions:** Number the responses to these questions on a separate sheet of paper and answer in typed, complete sentences in preparation for the Student-led Discussion.

- 1) Looking at Document A, analyze and explain a quote of Jefferson's condemnation of King George's ("his majesty's") actions with regards to British America.
- 2) Reviewing Document B, the excerpt from: "African Slavery in America," analyze and explain a quote of Paine's condemnation of slavery in America.
- 3) Looking at Document C, what do you think Jefferson meant by "All men are created equal"....? Looking at the words...what do you think each component of the phrase meant? "All men"? "Equal"?
- 4) Review Document D, the excerpt from Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Jefferson's revolutionary bill asserted that a government shall not interfere

with a person's right to practice religion freely. He stated that the "belief of men depend[s] not on their own will, but follow[s] involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds". Discuss the meaning of this quote. Also, recall that you have studied the Bill of Rights (1789). Where do we again see the principle of religious freedom expressed in that later document?

5) Reviewing these documents is a bridge to our study of the Civil War (sometimes called the Second American Revolution) in our next unit. Review document E, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, from November 1863. Discussing the language in the Declaration and the Address, be specific in your connection between Jefferson and Lincoln here.

6) Looking at secondary source F, agree or disagree with Dr. Jan Lewis's response to the question in the interview. Explain your choice.

7) To what extent do you think the United States is an expression of Jefferson's words in the introduction to the Declaration?

8) What do you think are some challenges we face as Americans in looking at our founding and the ideas that fueled the American Revolution?

9) Returning to our guiding question, what do you think are the principles on which our government is based? Discuss and explain your answer.

Extra credit questions:

10) When the president makes a decision, is it political or is it personal? Does it matter?

Under what circumstances? Discuss and explain your opinion.

11) Can you find examples of heroism in the documents? Where are there examples of leadership? Is leadership the same as heroism?

**Document texts for Seminar discussion**

**Document A. Excerpt from: Thomas Jefferson, A SUMMARY VIEW OF THE RIGHTS OF BRITISH AMERICA**

Resolved, that it be an instruction to the said deputies, when assembled in general congress with the deputies from the other states of British America, to propose to the said congress that an humble and dutiful address be presented to his majesty, begging leave to lay before him, as chief magistrate of the British empire, the united complaints of his majesty's subjects in America; complaints which are excited by many unwarrantable encroachments and usurpations, attempted to be made by the legislature of one part of the empire, upon those rights which God and the laws have given equally and independently to all. To represent to his majesty that these his states have often individually made humble application to his imperial throne to obtain, through its intervention, some redress of their injured rights, to none of which was ever even an answer condescended; humbly to hope that this their joint address, penned in the language of truth, and divested of those expressions of servility which would persuade his majesty that we are asking favours, and not rights, shall obtain from his majesty a more respectful acceptance. And this his majesty will think we have reason to expect when he reflects that he is no more than the chief officer of the people, appointed by the laws, and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in working the great machine of government, erected for their use, and consequently subject to their superintendance. And in order that these our rights, as well

as the invasions of them, may be laid more fully before his majesty, to take a view of them from the origin and first settlement of these countries.

To remind him that our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.....

..... That we next proceed to consider the conduct of his majesty, as holding the executive powers of the laws of these states, and mark out his deviations from the line of duty: By the constitution of Great Britain, as well as of the several American states, his majesty possesses the power of refusing to pass into a law any bill which has already passed the other two branches of legislature. ... For the most trifling reasons, and sometimes for no conceivable reason at all, his majesty has rejected laws of the most salutary tendency.

The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty's negative: Thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few African corsairs to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous

practice. Nay, the single interposition of an interested individual against a law was scarcely ever known to fail of success, though in the opposite scale were placed the interests of a whole country. That this is so shameful an abuse of a power trusted with his majesty for other purposes, as if not reformed, would call for some legal restrictions.

**Document B. Excerpt from: "African Slavery in America," *The Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, March 8, 1775.**

Note: The authorship of this document is the subject of some debate. Some attribute it to Thomas Paine; other scholars dispute that claim and do not attribute it to his works.

TO AMERICANS

That some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain, is rather lamentable than strange. But that many civilized, nay, Christianized people should approve, and be concerned in the savage practice, is surprising; and still persist, though it has been so often proved contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of Justice and Humanity, and even good policy, by a succession of eminent men, and several late publications.

Our Traders in MEN (an unnatural commodity!) must know the wickedness of that SLAVE-TRADE, if they attend to reasoning, or the dictates of their own hearts; and such as shun and stifle all these, willfully sacrifice Conscience, and the character of integrity to that golden idol.

The Managers of that Trade themselves, and other, testify, that man of these African nations inhabit fertile countries, and industrious farmers, enjoy plenty, and lived quietly, adverse to war, before the Europeans debauched them with liquors, and bribing them against one another; and that these inoffensive people are brought into slavery, by stealing them, tempting Kings to sell subjects, which they have no right to do, and hiring one tribe to ear against another. . . . By such wicked and inhuman ways the English are said to enslave towards one hundred thousand yearly . . .

Most shocking of all is alleging the Sacred Scriptures to favour this wicked practice. One would have thought none but infidel cavilers would endeavor to make them appear contrary to the pain dictates of natural light, and Conscience, in a matter of common Justice and Humanity, which they cannot be. . . . As much in vain, perhaps will they search ancient history for examples of the modern Slave-Trade. Too many nations enslaved the prisoners they took in war. But to go to nations with whom there is no war . . . purely to catch inoffensive people, like wild beasts , for slaves, is an height of outrage against Humanity and Justice, that seems left by Heathen nations to be practiced by pretended Christians. How shameful are all attempts to colour and excuse it! As these people are not convicted of forfeiting freedom, they still have a natural, perfect right to it; and the Governments whenever they come should, in justice set them free, and punish those who hold them in slavery . . .

But the chief design of this paper is . . . to entreat Americans to consider. . . . With what consistency, or decency, they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more, without the pretence of authority, or claim upon them?

**Document C. Excerpt from: The Declaration of Independence, 1776**

“ IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776. **The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,**

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it

is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States....”

**Document D, the excerpt from Section I of Jefferson’s, Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.**

“(I) **Whereas**, Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being Lord, both of body and mind yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavouring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the

particular pastor, whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the Ministry those temporary rewards, which, proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry...”

**Document E. Abraham Lincoln: Gettysburg Address, 1863.**

"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve

that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

**Document F. Excerpt from: PBS interview with historian Jan Lewis.**

**[Question]: How do you reconcile the author of the words "all men are created equal" with the owner of slaves who never freed them during his lifetime?**

Jefferson presents us with a problem because he wrote the words "all men are created equal," yet he owned slaves and, during his lifetime, did not free the slaves, even though he knew in his heart of hearts that slavery is wrong. That, in fact, is *the* dilemma. It's our national dilemma, which is to know that slavery is wrong, it was wrong and yet Jefferson continued to own slaves. And we continue to have a problem with racism in this country. The way I approach this issue is to recognize and to realize that when we judge Jefferson poorly, it is by his own standard. The only way we can judge him a failure is by holding up his own words against him, that all men are created equal. Had he not given us that doctrine, had he not popularized it in this extraordinary way in the nation's founding document, we wouldn't be able to judge him poorly, as we do. So, it's by Jefferson's own standard that we judge him, and he doesn't meet his own standard in some way, then in a very important way, Jefferson is a tragic figure.

**Additional Online resources:**

Digital History. This site includes commentary and the full text of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom.

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1357](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1357)

PBS. This site includes the full text of the interview with Dr. Jan Lewis, along with other excellent commentary on Jefferson.

<http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews/frame.htm>

## Works Cited

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