



Big Idea 5

Slavery and Revolutionary Ideals

“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.”

United States Declaration of Independence, 1776

When the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, people of African descent made up approximately one-fifth of the population of the new United States of America. The vast majority of them were enslaved, many by Revolutionaries. Other Revolutionaries, while not holding people as property themselves, profited indirectly from the system. How could the supporters of a resistance movement and then revolution against Great Britain support the words of the Declaration and still justify — or even simply allow — the practice of slavery?

Slavery, Liberty, and Natural Rights

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, as conflict with Great Britain grew, angry American colonists wrote letters, pamphlets, **petitions**, and plans of action, many of which shared one thing in common: they referred to their status within the British Empire as “slavery.” While we in the 21st century think first of the ownership of human beings when we hear that word, for white residents of the British Empire in the 18th century, another key definition of slavery was political, not physical. To be a slave meant to be deprived of one’s political liberties, to be forced to act by a ruler or his or her representatives, to lack control over one’s property, or to be under the absolute tyranny of another human being who exercised too much power.

Maintaining political (and economic and social) liberty was a high priority for the British on both sides of the Atlantic in the late-1700s. Just over a century before, England had experienced deep unrest that had started, among other reasons, from a concern that the king held too much power and his subjects, represented by Parliament, held too little. Power corrupted those who held it, his subjects believed, and turned rulers into tyrants. People on both sides of the conflict, known as the English Civil War, felt they needed to jealously guard their own liberties against a ruler or government that might try to take them. The outcome of this unrest, known as the Glorious Revolution, offered common people more representation and clearer promises regarding their rights.

By the late-1700s, what rights did British subjects believe they had? Many British subjects believed in the idea of “natural rights.” These were certain rights that all men were born with, which could not and should not be taken away. The people who believed in these rights were inspired by a wave of new scientific and philosophical ideas sweeping across Europe from the 1500s on that has come to be known as the Enlightenment. The scientists, philosophers, artists, and others who were associated with the Enlightenment argued that less emphasis should be placed on religion and tradition and more emphasis should be placed on reason, rational thought, and scientific analysis. Natural rights theory came out of this movement. While the Declaration of Independence is most famous for it, a number of documents in the 17th and 18th centuries asserted that men were born with the right to life, liberty, and property, or, as the Declaration says, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This meant that they should be able to make their own decisions about their lives and their property without the intrusion of others, and likewise, that they should not interfere with others as they exercised their own rights.

At the same time, proponents of Enlightenment theory argued that men could choose to work together to form governments that served their common interests and made life better for them. If the government no longer worked for, or benefitted them, they could dissolve the government and form a new and better one. This thinking, as well as that of natural rights, made it into the Declaration of Independence and many earlier documents. When white colonists wrote of their fear of enslavement in the mid-1700s, it was this political context of which they were thinking.

Contradictions of Slavery and Freedom

It was impossible, however, for colonists who resisted British authority in America to ignore the connections between their protests and those of enslaved people, or the contradictions between their words and actions. First, enslaved men and women wouldn’t let them. Throughout the British colonies, both in mainland North America and in the Caribbean, enslaved Africans had shown, through a variety of uprisings, revolts, and acts of resistance, that they believed themselves deserving of freedom and that they were prepared to get it by any means necessary. But in the 13 colonies, later states, where resistance and revolution were growing against Great Britain, free and enslaved people of African descent began using the colonists’ own words against them. In 1777, for example, “A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery” wrote that “they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It has Never Bin Considered that Every Principle form which Amarica has Acted in the Cours of their unhappy Dificultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favowrs of your petitioners” and asked for “the Enjoyments of that which is the Naturel Right of all men.”ⁱ

Some white Revolutionaries themselves pointed out that the political slavery others thought they were experiencing from the British, or soon would, was nothing compared to the physical slavery people of African descent experienced. Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John, for example, that “It always appeared a most **iniquitous** scheme to me — to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.”ⁱⁱ Sometimes they used religious arguments to make their points, stating that keeping people as slaves was against their Christian faith and contrary to the will of God. Other times they used political or philosophical ones, just as people of African descent did. For their demands of liberty, freedom, and equality to be taken seriously by Great Britain and the world, they needed to apply to everybody.

Saying “No” to Liberty for All

Slave-owners, and those who benefitted from slavery indirectly, had a variety of responses to arguments for abolition, **emancipation**, and equality. Some tried to rationalize it by arguing that England had forced it upon its colonies in the 17th century. Thomas Jefferson, for example, tried to include a passage in the Declaration of Independence stating that the King “had waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.” This argument ignored the fact that many colonists happily carried on or supported the trade in human beings in the 1600s and 1700s.

Some argued that people of African descent must have done something to deserve being sold or traded to Europeans back in Africa. Others argued that they were the cursed descendants of the biblical Ham (one of Noah’s sons) and enslavement was their curse. Still others argued that slavery actually offered African peoples the gift of Christianity. Many supporters of slavery argued some mixture of the above.

Beyond the rationalizations, some people simply admitted that slavery was wrong but said it was too difficult to get rid of. How, they wondered, could they demolish the institution of slavery without also demolishing the entire economy of their colonies, and later, the new United States of America? What would they do with the newly-freed people of African descent, whom many of them believed were inherently inferior to white people, despite ample evidence to the contrary. And some agreed that slavery was wrong, but it was just too convenient — for their lives, fortunes, families, and personal comfort — to give up.

Incremental Change

The question of who was actually included in the statement “all men are created equal” was not decided during the Revolutionary Era. But the fundamental problem it exposed was clear from the very start. People of African descent used their actions and their words to demand access to the natural rights of man, and radical Revolutionaries and those compelled by religious beliefs used their voices and political power to take several steps forward to ending slavery. Petitions and sermons, pamphlets and letters — and feet on the ground — were used to call out the hypocrisy of practicing slavery while calling for freedom. Lawmakers in Massachusetts tried to abolish slavery in 1771, but were refused by the royal governor. Rhode Island proclaimed in 1774 that all enslaved people brought to their colony would be declared free. Quakers in Pennsylvania helped pass the first gradual abolition act in the United States in 1780, before the Revolutionary War was even over. In 1782, Virginia repealed an act that prohibited **manumission**.

None of these actions were perfect. Freedom was often not immediate or widespread and it did not often mean equality. However, these actions provided, for some people of African descent, a foundation on which hope could be built.

ⁱ Petition for freedom to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives (manuscript copy), [13] January 1777. Jeremy Belknap Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=557.

ⁱⁱ “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0107>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, December 1761–May 1776, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 161–162.]