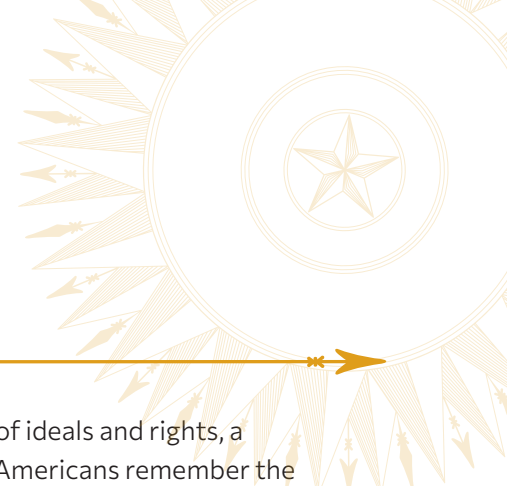


THE DECLARATION IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY UNITED STATES



The Declaration of Independence contains several elements, including statements of ideals and rights, a justification for secession, and a long list of grievances against a king. Today, many Americans remember the Declaration for its first elements, and in particular, its statement of human rights: “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.”

From the moment the American public heard these words in 1776, individuals and groups embraced those lines for themselves. They fought for the promise of the Declaration to become a reality. In the 20th century, these demands were strengthened by the creation of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Decolonization efforts around the world also energized rights movements in the United States. As the words “all human beings are created equal” – inspired by the United States Declaration of Independence – resonated throughout the world, American civil rights movements used global human rights efforts to support their causes at home.

Workers’ Rights and Labor Movements

Since the colonial era, American workers have taken opportunities to push for higher pay and better working conditions. During the Revolutionary War, one of the groups that showed their support for the idea of independence was the General Committee of Mechanics, a group of laborers and tradespeople in New York City who worked together to advocate for their rights. Just over 50 years later, a member of the Working Man’s Party authored a document that echoed the Declaration of Independence. George Henry Evans wrote, “‘When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary’ for one class of a community to assert their **natural and unalienable rights** in opposition to other classes of their fellow men, ‘and to assume among’ them a political ‘station of equality.’”

The United States saw a large increase in **unions** during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century. Labor organizations and unions, such as the Knights of Labor, American Federation of Labor, and Colored National Labor Union, were created to improve workers’ wages and working conditions. During the 1940s, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal supported laws that set minimum wages and maximum working hours and ensured the right of workers to organize unions. Though the second half of the 20th century showed a decline in unions, recent years have seen that change. A Pew Research Center study found that the majority of Americans approve of labor unions today. Recent years have seen an increase in labor strikes and unionization in new jobs and industries as more workers continue advocating for labor rights.

THE DECLARATION’S JOURNEY

While its ideas spread around the world, the Declaration itself also traveled extensively during its first 150 years. In the first ten years of its life, the version of the Declaration that features John Hancock’s large signature traveled across Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York with the Continental Congress. It later came under the care of the Secretary of State in the United States capital of Philadelphia and, later, Washington, D.C. It was frequently evacuated during times of war. By the 1920s, the Declaration was put in the care of the Library of Congress. In 1952, it was moved to the National Archives, where it remains on display today.

Civil Rights Movements

African American Civil Rights

After the Civil War, new **amendments** to the **Constitution** expanded and defended the rights of African Americans. However, in the years that followed many loopholes were introduced to limit these rights. It would take over a century of work by many individuals and organizations to begin officially dismantling these systems across the country.

For most of the first half of the 20th century, **civil rights** activists and organizations, particularly the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), used the court system and a variety of forms of protest to fight for an end to racial violence and discrimination. In 1917, the NAACP organized thousands of protesters to march through New York City in a Silent Protest Parade. Some of their signs directly quoted the Declaration of Independence.

By the 1950s, legal **segregation** began to crumble. Ruby Bridges, at six years old, was the first African American student to enter a formerly all-white school in the South almost six years after the case that ended school segregation. She is in her seventies today. In Montgomery, Alabama, a bus **boycott** in 1955 led to the **desegregation** of transportation in the city. Experienced **activist** Rosa Parks was a key figure in this movement. Across the country, people boycotted, marched, held sit-ins, and more to push for the Declaration's words that "all men are created equal" to apply to all Americans, regardless of race or the country of their ancestors' origin.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott helped bring minister and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. to the national stage. King became a prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and his presence at protests drew the **nation's** attention. His writings, speeches, and sermons promoted an end to segregation, racial discrimination, and racial violence. King often quoted from the Declaration of Independence and called on the nation to live up to its fundamental values.

"We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because THE GOAL OF AMERICA IS FREEDOM."

- Martin Luther King, Jr., April 16, 1963

Children and teenagers believed in the Declaration's ideals as well and were active players in the Civil Rights Movement. The Children's Crusade of Birmingham, Alabama saw thousands of school children participate in a series of nonviolent marches against segregation and other human rights abuses. The reaction to this campaign increased support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The push for an end to racial discrimination across all areas of American life continues today and still draws from the powerful ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

Native American Civil Rights and Self-Determination

During the Revolutionary War, some Native American nations were allies of the Revolutionaries, while many sided with the British. After the war, all had to figure out how to navigate relationships with the new United States of America. These relationships were complicated by the new country's desire for more land and a belief by many Americans that the only Native Americans worth respect or concern were those who left behind their languages and cultures to become more like Americans. In the 20th century, as in the 18th and 19th, many Native peoples and nations fought against these efforts, demanding the return of their land, the protection of natural resources, the right to true **self-government** as sovereign nations, recognition as United States citizens, and more.

Musician, educator, author, and activist Zitkala-Ša (meaning Red Bird) of the Yankton Dakota Sioux used her writing to promote Dakota culture and fought for **Indigenous** rights. She and other early activists in the 20th century helped pass the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. This act granted Indigenous people U.S. citizenship and acknowledged their

right to vote. However, some **states** continued to **disenfranchise** Native Americans. The last state to acknowledge Indigenous people's right to vote did so in 1971.

As Native American activists lobbied for their rights, some echoed the grievances within the Declaration of Independence as their own grievances against the United States. This included the suspension of Native American legislatures, interference with court systems on Native American reservations, and taxation of Native peoples who were prevented from exercising their right to vote. Others wrote their own declarations. In 1961, for instance, the American Indian Chicago Conference gathered together approximately 700 Native Americans from over 60 tribes and nations to prepare a Declaration of Indian Purpose. It stated their belief in "the future of a greater America, an America which we were the first to love, where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will be a reality. In such a future, with Indians and all other Americans cooperating, a cultural climate will be created in which the Indian people will grow and develop as members of a free society." It advocated for fair treatment and assistance by the U.S. government to ensure that the future they envisioned could come to pass.

Young people who attended the American Indian Chicago Conference supported and led Native American activist efforts throughout the 1960s and 1970s, participating in groups like the American Indian Movement, Indians of All Tribes, and the National Youth Council. Successors of groups like these continue to advocate for Native American rights to this day.

Gay Rights

Though the Gay Rights Movement gained greater visibility in the last few decades of the 20th century, **grassroots** movements and organizations for equal rights under the law for gay and lesbian individuals have been in existence since at least the 1920s. By the 1960s, a yearly protest called the Annual Reminder was regularly held in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Participants marched in a single-file line, dressed in office attire to call attention to people who had been fired because of their sexual orientation. Some of the signs they carried quoted the Declaration of Independence. After a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gathering place for gay individuals in New York City, in 1969, the first Pride Parade took the place of the Annual Reminder and has continued ever since.

“In the Declaration of Independence it is written, ‘All men are created equal and they are endowed with certain inalienable rights...’ YOU CANNOT ERASE THOSE WORDS from the Declaration of Independence.”

- Harvey Milk, June 25, 1978

The Gay Rights Movement has expanded to include bi-sexual, transgender, queer, and other individuals, and, over the course of its existence, has produced many activists. Barbara Gittings, considered the “mother of the Gay Rights Movement,”

started the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. She helped organize the Annual Reminder **pickets**. Activist Bayard Rustin was a key organizer within the Civil Rights Movement, helping to organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, among other actions, and later turned his attention to supporting gay rights as well. Harvey Milk became the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, and one of the first in the United States. Artist Gilbert Baker created the rainbow flag that became a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community and Pride, drawing inspiration from the American flags used to celebrate the Bicentennial. Randy Wicker joined the movement in 1958 and continues to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community on his social media platforms today.

These 20th century movements did not occur in a vacuum. They were frequently inspired by or collaborated with each other. Many of these movements promoted strength of community and love of culture and identity. All were inspired by, and often used the words of, the Declaration of Independence.

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, other movements gained traction as well. Some examples include:

- In 1968, efforts by two UC Berkley students, Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, helped unite diverse Asian American activists into a single movement to fight against racism.
- A second wave of the women’s rights movement in the 1970s pushed for greater freedom and equality in education and the workplace. Women of diverse backgrounds fought to ensure that all women’s voices were included.
- As a part of a larger Chicano (or Mexican American) movement, César Chávez and Delores Huerta organized the National Farm Workers Association in 1962 to advocate for farm workers’ rights – including safer working conditions and the right to form unions.
- The disability community advocated for accessibility within public spaces and equal opportunities for education and employment, among others. The American Disabilities Act of 1990 was one of their major achievements.

Movements of the 20th century have changed and adapted to new times and new generations as the decades moved forward. How will they continue to change in the future? What new movements might arise?

Today, thanks to generations of revolutionaries who have been part of the Declaration’s journey, we can decide what the Declaration means for ourselves and our future.

We can advocate for **representative government**.

We can protect the rights of all Americans, and all humans.

We can pursue happiness and celebrate our freedoms.

We can seek truth to deepen our understanding of the world.

We can speak out when we witness injustice.

We can remember the Declaration’s journey and see that it continues.