



LESSON PLAN

250 Years of Defending American Ideals

High school (9-12)

OVERVIEW

The Declaration of Independence outlines foundational American ideals such as equality, natural rights, popular sovereignty, and resistance to tyranny. Although these principles were articulated in 1776, they have required continued defense and expansion over the past 250 years of American history.

In this lesson, students will review the American ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence and examine how those ideals have been defended by individuals buried at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). Working in small groups, students will analyze primary sources connected to individuals buried at ANC and create a poster exhibit that links those individuals to one specific American ideal. Students will then reflect on how that ideal shapes their own lives and consider how they might defend it in the future.

Resources include an introductory PowerPoint presentation and primary source packet.

Estimated time: 60 minutes + homework

STANDARDS

Content standards vary by state. This lesson can be used to teach the following state standards and similar wording may be found in your state standards.

- NCSS.D2.His.1.9–12: Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- NCSS.D2.His.5.9–12: Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
- NCSS.D4.1.9–12: Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.
- NCSS.D4.8.9–12: Apply a range of deliberative and democratic strategies and procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms, schools, and out-of-school civic contexts.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and explain key American ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence.
- Analyze how those ideals have been defended and expanded over time.
- Use historical sources to connect individuals buried at Arlington National Cemetery to American ideals.
- Reflect on the relevance of American ideals in their own lives.

RESOURCES NEEDED

- PowerPoint presentation
- Primary source packet, 1 per class
- 5 pieces of posterboard, labeled:
 - Equality: “All men are created equal”
 - Natural rights: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
 - Governments derive their power from the consent of the governed
 - Right to resistance and revolution
 - Impartiality and fairness in law and judgment
- Scissors
- Tape

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Introduction: (20 minutes)

250 Years of Defending
American Ideals

The Declaration of Independence is one of the most important documents in United States history because it defines what the nation stood for at its founding. Written in 1776, it also explains why the American colonies decided to break away from Great Britain. Most importantly, it describes core ideas about equality, natural rights, and the purpose of government. These ideals became the foundation of the United States and still help shape how Americans understand their country today. They also influenced other people around the world to consider democracy as a form of government.

Let’s look at the Declaration of Independence together and identify some of those foundational ideals. The Declaration can be broken into four main parts: the Introduction, Preamble, List of Grievances, and formal Declaration of Independence from Britain.



<p>Introduction</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Introduction: <i>Text on screen</i></p> <p>The Introduction explains why the Declaration was created. It states that when one people decide to separate from another, they should explain their reasons clearly and respectfully to the world.</p> <p>Key Points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Declaration is addressed not only to Great Britain, but to a global audience. • The authors understood that breaking away from Britain was a serious and potentially dangerous act. • This section establishes the idea that political decisions should be justified with reason and evidence, not made arbitrarily.
<p>Preamble</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Preamble: <i>Text on screen</i></p> <p>The Preamble is the most famous part of the Declaration. It outlines the core principles and ideals on which the American political system is based.</p> <p>Key Points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These ideas were radical in 1776, especially the claim that government exists to serve the people. • “All men” did not reflect reality at the time—enslaved people, women, Indigenous peoples, and others were excluded. • Despite its limitations, the Preamble established ideals that later generations would use to argue for expanded rights. <p>Ask: Which American ideals can you identify in this section?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality: “All men are created equal” • Natural rights: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness • Popular sovereignty: Governments derive their power from the consent of the governed • Right to resistance and revolution: if a government becomes destructive of the people’s rights and freedoms, the people



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This section transformed the document from an argument into an action. • Signing the Declaration was an act of treason under British law. • The final pledge emphasized collective responsibility and sacrifice. <p>Ask: What American ideals can you identify in this section?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States is a free and independent nation.
<p>Defending American Ideals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American values in the Declaration of Independence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Equality: "All men are created equal" ○ Natural rights: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ○ Governments derive their power from the consent of the governed ○ Right to resistance and revolution ○ Impartiality and fairness in law and judgment • These values cannot exist without being fought for and defended • These fights can happen on the battlefield, in the courts, or voting booth. 	<p>The ideals described in the Declaration and the institutions they support cannot exist without being fought for and defended in some way. Initially, these ideals were the rallying cry for the American Revolution. After the war, they became the basis for the Constitution and Bill of Rights.</p> <p>For 250 years, Americans have continued to fight for and defend these ideals. Sometimes these fights happen on the battlefield, sometimes in the courts, sometimes in the voting booth.</p> <p>In this lesson, we will look at how people throughout history — including individuals buried at Arlington National Cemetery — have worked to defend and expand the ideals first written in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Arlington National Cemetery is primarily dedicated to those who have defending the United States through military service, but some of the people buried there defended it in other ways as well.</p>

Group Activity: (15 minutes)

- Hang five posters around the room, with the following titles:
 - Equality: "All men are created equal"
 - Natural rights: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
 - Governments derive their power from the consent of the governed
 - Right to resistance and revolution
 - Impartiality and fairness in law and judgment
- Break class into groups and give each group a selection of 3-5 primary sources from the primary source packet. There are some repeat individuals in the source packet. Their primary sources are mixed amongst the other sources so that students will be more likely to get a mix of individuals.



- Students will review their sources and decide which ideal each source best represents. Then they will cut out and tape each source to its corresponding poster.
- Invite students to review the other sources and posters as they are completed.

Class Discussion: (25 minutes)

- Review the posters together as a class.
- Suggested discussion questions:
 - Which of your sources stood out the most to you? Why?
 - How has this ideal been defended in the last 250 years?
 - How have the meanings of ideas like equality or liberty changed over time, based on the examples you studied?
 - Which individual or story from this lesson most challenged or changed your understanding of American history? Why?

HOMEWORK

- Write a 500-word essay responding to the following:
 - Choose one of the ideals discussed in the lesson. To what extent does this ideal affect your daily life?
 - Which actions could you take to defend this ideal?
- In your essay, you must reference at least two of the sources from the packet.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Reflect on other individuals you have learned about in class and connect them to the ideals they represent.

PLANNING A VISIT TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY?

The individuals included in this lesson are all buried at Arlington National Cemetery. You can use the [ANC Explorer app](#) to visit their graves and find more information about some of them in the cemetery's [walking tours](#).

Gravesites:

- Anna Kelton Wiley, Section 13, Grave 5959-B. Included in the Women's Rights Walking Tour.
- Denton Winslow Crocker, Jr., Section 13, Grave 9088-A
- Earl Warren, Section 21, Grave S-32
- George C. Marshall, Section 7, Grave 8198. Included in the World War II Walking Tour.
- Harvey W. Wiley, Section 13, Grave 5959-B



- Helen Taft, Section 30, Grave S-14. Included in the Women’s Rights Walking Tour
- Hugo Black, Section 30, Grave 649-LH
- Jack Damron, Columbarium Court 8, Section SS, Column 23, Niche 1
- James McCubbin Lingan, Section 1, Grave 89-A. Included in the Revolutionary War Walking Tour.
- Jeanne Holm, Section 65, Grave 245. Included in the Air Force Walking Tour and Women’s Military Service Walking Tour.
- Jerome Yellin, Columbarium Court 9, Section NII, Column 8, Niche 3
- Jimmie Kanaya, Section 25, Grave 3495
- John F. Kennedy, Section 45, Grave S-45. Included in the Cold War Walking Tour.
- John Follin, Section 1, Grave 295-I-2. Included in the Revolutionary War Walking Tour.
- John Foster Dulles, Section 21, Grave S-31. Included in the Cold War Walking Tour.
- Lewis Merrill, Section 2, Grave 944-WS
- Matthew Ridgway, Section 7, Grave 8196-1
- Medgar Evers, Section 36, Grave 1431. Included in the Segregation and Civil Rights Walking Tour
- Milton Holland, Section 23, Grave 21713. Included in the African American Military Heroes Walking Tour and Civil War Walking Tour.
- Montgomery Meigs, Section 1, Grave 1-EH. Included in the Civil War Walking Tour and Military Technology Walking Tour.
- John Rodgers Meigs, Section 1, Grave 1-SH
- OSB Wall, Section 1, Grave 124-B. Included in the Segregation and Civil Rights Walking Tour.
- Robert F. Kennedy, Section 45, Grave S-45-A
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Section 5, Grave 7016-1. Included in the Women’s Rights Walking Tour
- Thurgood Marshall, Section 5, Grave 40-3. Included in the African American Trailblazers Walking Tour and Segregation and Civil Rights Walking Tour.
- Zitkala-Ša (buried under her English name Gertrude Bonnin), Section 2, Grave 4703. Included in the Arts and Culture Walking Tour and Women’s Rights Walking Tour.



LESSON SOURCES

Anna Kelton Wiley

Quote: Wiley, Anna Kelton. "Why We Picketed The White House." *Good Housekeeping*, February 1918.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015024014469&view=1up&seq=159>.

Image: Harris & Ewing, WOMAN SUFFRAGE. PICKETS AT WHITE HOUSE, 1917, Library of Congress,

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Denton Winslow Crocker, Jr.

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[services/service/vhp/O111/O11174/pd0001.pdf](https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/vhp/O111/O11174/pd0001.pdf).

Earl Warren

Brown v. Board quote: "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)." Justia U.S. Supreme Court.

Accessed February 19, 2026. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/>.

Reynolds v. Sims quote: "Reynolds v. Sims, 377 U.S. 533 (1964)." Justia U.S. Supreme Court. Accessed February 19,

2026. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/377/533/>.

George C. Marshall

Quote: The George C. Marshall Foundation. "The Marshall Plan Speech." Accessed February 19, 2026.

<https://www.marshallfoundation.org/the-marshall-plan/speech/>.

Image: I. Spreekmeester, Whatever the weather we only reach welfare together, circa 1950, Library of Congress,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017651526/>.

Harvey W. Wiley

Quote: Wiley, Harvey W. *The History of a Crime Against the Food Law*. Washington, D. C., H. W. Wiley, 1929.

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Image: "Gosh, Doctor, We All Hate to See You Go," published in *The Rocky Mountain News*, March 17, 1912, page 1.

Helen Taft

Quote: "Aided by Mrs. Taft." *Washington Post*, March 17, 1912. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/28989493/>.

Hugo Black

Quote: "Wesberry v. Sanders, 376 U.S. 1 (1964)." Justia U.S. Supreme Court. Accessed February 19, 2026.

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/376/1/>.

Jack Damron

Quote: Frye, Gregory. "Army Commemorates 1957 Little Rock Deployment." U.S. Army. September 19, 2011.

https://www.army.mil/article/4897/army_commemorates_1957_little_rock_deployment.

Image: George Silk, African-American students escorted by federal troops, Little Rock Central High School, 1957,

LIFE Magazine, <https://www.life.com/history/little-rock-nine-1957-photos/>.

James McCubbin Langan

Quote: "Meeting in Montgomery County." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, MD), August 27, 1812.

<https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/o13800/o13803/pdf/montgomeryco.pdf>.

Jeanne Holm

Quote: Jeanne Holm, interview with Mary-Jo Binker, January 1, 2003, transcript, Jeanne M. Holm Collection

(AFC/2001/001/04293), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress,

<https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.04293>.



Image: Jeanne M. Holm receiving the rank of brigadier general, July 16, 1971, Associated Press.

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John F. Kennedy

National Health quote: Kennedy, John Fitzgerald. “Special Message to the Congress on National Health Needs.” February 27, 1962. The American Presidency Project. Accessed February 19, 2026.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-national-health-needs>.

Voice of America quote: Kennedy, John Fitzgerald. “Remarks on the 20th Anniversary of the Voice of America.” February 26, 1962. The American Presidency Project. Accessed February 19, 2026.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-20th-anniversary-the-voice-america>.

John Follin

Quote: Edmonston, Gabriel. A Genealogical History of the Follin Family in America. University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1911. Accessed on Google Books, February 19, 2026.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/oZIMAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.

John Foster Dulles

Quote: Dulles, John Foster. “A Policy of Boldness.” *Life*, May 19, 1952.

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Quote: Merrill to Townsend, January 17, 1872, Adjutant General’s Reports, National Archives.

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Quote: M.B. Ridgway, Memo subject “Why We Are Here,” January 21, 1951. Available online through War Room, Army War College, accessed February 19, 2026. https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/Box_17-095-Ridgway-Why-We-Are-Here-Memo-Transcribed.pdf.

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CBS interview quote: Bill Peters “A Talk with Medgar Evers,” CBS, New York Post, published in *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, edited by Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable. Basic Civitas Books, 2006.

Image: Medgar Evers and Roy Wilkins, June 1, 1963, National Portrait Gallery, <https://npg.si.edu/blog/medgar-evers-and-roy-wilkins>.

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Quote: Holland, Milton. “Holland Letter 1.” January 19, 1864. National Park Service. Accessed February 19, 2026.

<https://www.nps.gov/rich/learn/historyculture/mhletter1.htm>.



Image: E. S. Walker, Milton M. Holland Carte de Visite, 1865.

Montgomery and John Rodgers Meigs:

Quote: Meigs, Montgomery Cunningham. *Montgomery C. Meigs to Dr. Charles D. Meigs*. Letter. Transcribed by Michelle A. Krowl. From Library of Congress, *Montgomery C. Meigs Papers*. Accessed February 19, 2026.

https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss32540.mss32540-a05_0571_0728/?sp=115.

Image: John Rodgers Meigs tomb, Arlington National Cemetery Explorer.

OSB Wall

Quote: “Felon Feast’ At Oberlin.” *The Cleveland Leader*, January 13, 1859. <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-cleveland-leader-felon-feast-at-ob/96545073/>.

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Image: Warren K. Leffler, [AF23.1] Negro demonstration in Washington, D.C. Justice Dept. Bobby Kennedy speaking to crowd, June 14, 1963, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688162/>.

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Quote: “Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati.” Society of the Cincinnati. Accessed February 19, 2026. <https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/institution-the-society-of-the-cincinnati/>.

Thurgood Marshall

Quote: “Harry Briggs, Jr., et al. v. R.W. Elliott, et al.” December 8, 1953. Oyez. Brown Revisited. Accessed February 19, 2026. <https://brown.oyez.org/transcripts/>

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