

Handout E: The Declaration, the Founders, and Slavery

Directions: Read the information below and use your understanding to complete the response activity on the next page.

"All Men Are Created Equal"

How did the people of 1776 understand these words? How do we understand them now?

With this statement, the Founders explained their belief that there was no natural class of rulers among people. Not everyone was born with the same talents or habits, of course. People are different. But the natural differences among people do not mean that certain people are born to rule over others. Some people might be better suited to govern, but they have no right to rule over others without their permission. This permission is called consent of the governed.

Some say that the Declaration's authors did not mean to include everyone when they wrote "all men are created equal." They say that Jefferson and the Continental Congress just meant to include white men who owned property. Jefferson and the Continental Congress did not believe that there was a natural class of rulers, and they asserted that the colonists had the same right to rule themselves as the people of England.

As a group, the Founders were conflicted about slavery. Many of them knew it was evil. It had already been done away with in some places, and they hoped that it would die out in future generations. Slavery was an important economic and social institution in the United States. The Founders understood that they would have to tolerate slavery as part of a political compromise.

They did not see a way to take further action against slavery in their lifetimes, though many freed their slaves after their deaths.

Over time, more and more Americans have come to see the Declaration as a moral argument against slavery. But this argument was not made by abolitionists during the Declaration's time.

When Congress began debating slavery in new territories in the 19th century, Americans began basing their arguments in the Declaration. Eventually, more people came to realize that the American ideal of self-government meant that black Americans should participate just as fully in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship as white Americans.



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1. He [the King] has 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 and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither... Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold...
-Original draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776
2. Article the Sixth. There shall be neither Slavery nor involuntary Servitude in the said territory otherwise than in the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted; Provided always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.
-Northwest Ordinance, 1787
3. There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery].
-George Washington, 1786
4. We have seen the mere distinction of color made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.
-James Madison, 1787
5. Slavery is ... an atrocious debasement of human nature.
- Benjamin Franklin, 1789
6. Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation [removal] of slavery from the United States....I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in ... abhorrence.
-John Adams, 1819
7. It is much to be wished that slavery may be abolished. The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused.
-John Jay, 1786

Select one quotation and write a response. How, if at all, does this information help you understand the topic of the Founders' view on slavery?
