

Thomas Jefferson

The Declaration of Independence (1776)

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable 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.

Abigail Adams

“Letter to John Adams” (1776)

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us...I desire you would remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend...I cannot say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken – and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.

William Lloyd Garrison

“The Dangers of the Nation” (July 4, 1829)

Every Fourth of July, our Declaration of Independence is produced, with a sublime indignation, to set forth the tyranny of the mother country and to challenge the admiration of the world. But what a pitiful detail of grievances does this document present in comparison with the wrongs which our slaves endure!...Before God, I must say that such a glaring contradiction as exists between our creed and practice that the annals of 6,000 years cannot parallel. In view of it, I am ashamed of my country; of our hypocritical cant about the inalienable rights of man. I could not, for my right hand, stand up before a European assembly and exult that I am an American citizen, and denounce the usurpations of a kingly government as wicked and unjust...the recollection of my country's barbarity and despotism would blister my lips and cover my cheeks with burning blushes of shame.

George Fitzhugh

Sociology for the South, or the Failure of the Free Society (1854)

Men are not “born entitled to equal rights!”...It is, we believe, conceded on all hands that men are not born physically, morally, or intellectually equal; some are males, some are females, some from birth, large, strong, and healthy, others weak, small, and sickly; some are naturally amiable, others prone to all kinds of wickedness; some brave, others timid. Their natural inequalities beget inequalities of rights. The weak in mind or body require guidance, support, and protection; they must obey and work for those who protect and guide them; they have a natural right to guardians, committees, teachers, or masters. Nature has made them slaves; all that law and government can do is modify, and mitigate their slavery. In the absence of legally instituted slavery, their condition would be worse under the natural slavery of the weak to the strong, the foolish to the wise and cunning. The wise and virtuous, the brave, the strong in mind and body, are by nature born to command and protect, and law but follows nature in making them rules, legislators, judges, captains, husbands, guardians, committees, and masters.

Abraham Lincoln

“Speech at Springfield, Illinois” (June 26, 1857)

I think the authors [of the Declaration of Independence] intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal with “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”...They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked at, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere...Its authors meant it to be – as, thank God, it is now proving itself – a stumbling block to all those who in aftertimes might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They know the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should reappear in this fair land and commence their vocation, they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.

Abraham Lincoln

“Letter to Joshua Speed” (1850s)

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that ‘*all men are created equal.*’ We now practically read it ‘all men are created equal, except *negroes.*’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except *negroes, and foreigners and Catholics.*’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy [sic].

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

“Address to the New York State Legislature” (1860)

The prejudice against color, of which we hear so much, is no stronger than that against sex. It is produced by the same cause, and manifested very much in the same way. The Negro's skin and the woman's sex are both *prima facie* [of first view] evidence that they were intended to be in subjection to the white Saxon man...Just imagine an inhabitant of another planet entertaining himself some pleasant evening in searching over our great national compact, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitutions; what would he think of those “women and Negroes” that must be so fenced in, so guarded against? Why, he would certainly suppose we were monsters...Man is in such a labyrinth of contradictions with his marital and property rights; he is so befogged on the whole question of maidens, wives, and mothers, that from pure benevolence we should relieve him from this troublesome branch of legislation. We should vote, and make laws for ourselves...Undo what man did for us in the Dark Ages, and strike our all special legislation for us; strike the words “white male” from all your constitutions, and then, with fair standing, let us sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish together.

W. E. B. Du Bois

The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line...How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience...Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; of like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil...It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength along keeps it from being torn asunder...the Negro simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face...If worse come to worst, can the moral fiber of this country survive the slow throttling and murder of nine millions of men?...We must unceasingly and firmly oppose [white America]. By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to us, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: “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.”