

Documents for the Civil Rights Movement

Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence: *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.*
--Founding Fathers July 4, 1776

Questions to consider:

1. According to the text, why do governments exist?
 2. When a government is not doing this (answer to #1) what is listed as an option for the people to do?
 3. What should happen after men have been held under a long train of abuses?
 4. What are a few of the “long train of abuses” African Americans have endured by 1950?
 5. If you were a civil rights activist how would you use the Declaration to support your cause?
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The Gettysburg Address

Before you begin: A “score” is twenty years, so four score and seven years is 87 years

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live... The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”
--Abraham Lincoln November 19, 1863

Questions to consider:

1. Why did Lincoln give a speech about Civil Rights after the Battle of Gettysburg?
2. What event was Lincoln referencing that was “four score and seven years” ago?
3. If Lincoln had not been assassinated and had instead been President another four (or possibly more) years, do you think equal rights would have been given to African Americans in the 1860s instead of the 1960s? Use specific wording in the Gettysburg Address to defend your answer.

14th Amendment: Section 1. *All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.*

--US Constitution 1868

Questions to Consider:

1. How does this Amendment tie to the Declaration of Independence?
 2. How would you use this document in your favor if you were a civil rights activist?
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15th Amendment: Section 1. *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.*

--US Constitution 1868

Questions to Consider:

1. What does this amendment do?
 2. According to the wording, who is protected by this amendment?
 3. How would you use this document in your favor if you were a civil rights activist?
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Excerpt from MLK Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

"We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our Constitutional and God given rights and I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait."

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters. . . when you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.
--MLK Jr. April 16, 1963

Questions to consider:

1. How does MLK Jr. justify breaking some laws?
 2. List at least five grievances he feels white people cannot understand but African Americans know all too well.
 3. How would you have explained it to your daughter, if you had been there in 1963, and she wasn't allowed into the amusement park based on the color of her skin?
 4. Have you ever been anywhere where you felt you were singled out for any unjust reason?
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An excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech

"Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring -- when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children -- black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics -- will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" --Washington DC August 28, 1963

Questions to consider:

1. What event was MLK Jr. referencing that was five score years ago?
 2. If President Lincoln could have seen America in 1963, what would he have likely thought about the state of the union (how things are going in the US)? Use both the Gettysburg Address and the MLK Jr. speech.
 3. Why does MLK Jr. reference the Declaration of Independence when he includes the phrase, *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*
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Excerpt from a Newspaper, year unknown

"COLORED" GETS THREE YEARS--
"WHITE" THIRTY DAYS

COLUMBIA, S.C.—The peculiar workings of justice in the Southland was shown here one day last week when Jas. Davenport, Colored, was sentenced to three years at hard labor for stealing a bicycle, and Clarence D. Gould, white, was sentenced to thirty days in the county jail for stealing an automobile.

Both sentences were imposed the same day and in the same court room—Judge Memminger presiding. Both men were found guilty of stealing.

Chart on Poverty Levels

