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"Declaration of Independence: Advancing American
Ideals"

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The Declaration of Independence—its words, elements, and ramifications—remains profoundly relevant in America. As the founding document of the world's longest running democracy and the ultimate expression of the ideas, values, and principles that culminated in the American Revolution, it certainly deserves a special place in our national consciousness, debates, policies, and laws.

The celebration of the Declaration, from coast to coast on July 4, unites the nation in civic idealism in a way that no other national holiday can. Students recite memorable lines from America's political creed, unique to the world at its birth. Parades and fireworks celebrate liberty and independence and commemorate the vision and courage of the men in Philadelphia who signed the Declaration despite the risk to life and limb that their signatures invited. Government officials read proclamations and deliver speeches invoking its values and themes. The full day of celebration suggests possibilities for civic education.

The celebration—and cerebation—of the Declaration yields important discussions about its origins and intellectual influences, as well as critical questions about the means of its fulfillment. Let us consider today two cornerstones, the principle that "all men are created equal" and the premise that "just" governments derive their legitimacy from the

consent of the governed. Both assertions were radical for their time and drew upon the work of dissidents, the Levellers and Diggers, in 17th Century England.

Abraham Lincoln, our poet president, described the Declaration as "the sheet anchor of the Republic," a charter that set forth a new American creed, announcing to the world the birth of a nation "conceived in liberty," dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." For Lincoln, the institution of slavery meant that the Declaration was speaking not of rights for all in 1776, but rather of "aspirational rights" that could be achieved once the nation reached political and social maturity.

The fulfillment of this cardinal principle of republicanism awaited the drafting and ratification of the 14th Amendment which, in addition to protection for due process and the privileges and immunities of citizenship, guaranteed the "equal protection of the law." This historic provision, however, was soon deprived of its majesty through Supreme Court decisions, Jim Crow and segregation laws that relegated Black Americans to second class citizenship.

Drained of its promise, the premise of equal protection found critical support in a series of decisions, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), that struck down segregation in public schools and affirmative action programs that began to level the playing field. The Court's ruling last week striking down affirmative action in universities raises deep concerns about the future of opportunities in higher education for underrepresented communities.

America's assertion of independence rested on the embryonic idea of popular sovereignty, the premise that the authority and legitimacy of government are derived

from the consent of the governed. That assertion, the offspring of English dissidents who rebelled against the authority of the monarchy, justified the American Revolution. Indeed, the long list of grievances against England featured mostly prominently the colonists' outrage at the specter of being subordinate to parliamentary authority—including taxing powers—without representation. Few sentiments in Americans' political memory banks rival in familiarity the rallying cry of the revolution: "no taxation without representation."

That philosophical cornerstone of the American rebellion has faced stern challenges in our history, particularly when it involves denial of voting rights. The 15th Amendment and the 19th Amendment remedied denial of the franchise to Blacks and women, respectively, but the embarrassing fact of denial of voting representation in Congress to those Americans who live in Washington, D.C., is an affront to those colonists who gave their lives in the revolution for the right to voting representation in Parliament.

Let us stamp that inequality and deprivation of a foundational right with an exclamation point. The population of Washington, D.C., is approximate to that of Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota combined. We can ask residents of these great states how they would feel if, say tomorrow, they awakened with news that they were denied representation in Congress. Who would speak for them on the great issues of the day, issues affecting their regions and home life? Would such a denial move them to urge voting representation in Congress for fellow Americans who also pay taxes and go to war to defend the nation and, in the end, bear the same obligations and duties of citizenship that they do?

