

## **Perspective 1: America is a Revolutionary Idea**

The American Revolution, which created the United States, is still perhaps the most important transformation in world history. The American Revolution was the first anti-colonial, democratic revolution in history. The American Revolution marked the end of a traditional world order dominated by old world European hierarchies. This was the end of an America ruled by Kings, and the birth of American society ruled by individuals. Of course, the rule of individuals in America was often marked with conflict. The Founders of America had a democratic vision even though it was often distorted when it applied.

Still, the American Revolution was unlike any others in the history of revolutions. The fact that the American Revolution brought a dramatic change in the government signifies a revolution. The American government that followed was very different from its royal predecessor.

While the question of how revolutionary the American Revolution was remains an unresolved issue, there is no doubt that the American Revolution was a real revolution. It was a struggle to progress from monarchy (rule by kings or queens) to republic (democracy). And it succeeded in doing what it set out to do – to give men more liberty than they had previously possessed.

And although the revolution did not produce an immediate end to inequality, slavery or racism, it gave America the ideas that we would later use to fight these.

**Source:** Wood, Gordon. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (book), 1991.

## **Perspective 2: America is Not Revolutionary**

The leaders of the American Revolution used the powerful language of liberty and equality to get the support of the people to fight in a revolution against England. It was a war that ended monarchy, but it did nothing to end slavery or inequality.

The American Revolution only switched the power from elites of the British Empire to elites of America. The upper class in America was able to use the abuses that Britain had committed – Stamp Act, Tea Tax, and Housing Soldiers – to create propaganda that aroused the middle and lower classes. It wasn't hard; after all, since the poor and the working class had to house the soldiers they were hurt more by taxes than the rich.

To use the phrase “all men are created equal” is an interesting statement since many Americans were clearly omitted from this language: indigenous, free and enslaved black people, and women. Rich white men dominated the Continental Congress, the first American government which organized the American army and governed during the war. George Washington was the richest man in America. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. Thomas Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves. And so on.

The situation of black people after the revolution was complex. George Washington turned down the requests of black people, seeking freedom, to fight in the revolutionary army. In the northern states, the revolution led to the end of slavery – but only very slowly. And in the South, where the majority of the enslaved lived, slavery actually expanded after the revolution. As for indigenous people, when the British were defeated there was no one to stand in the way of the Americans taking even more land from them.

Finally, when the Constitution was being written – the founding document that would replace the King's rule with a democratic rule – women, the enslaved, indigenous, and men without property were not represented. And so the Constitution of the US did not reflect any of their interests either.

**Source:** Zinn, Howard. *The People's History of the United States* (book), 2003.

### **Perspective 3: We Cannot Celebrate America**

*Frederick Douglass made this speech on the Fourth of July, 1852 to a white, American audience.*

Pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

I am not included within the pale [*scope or extent*] of this glorious anniversary!...The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed [*given*] by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn...

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham [*fake*]; your boasted liberty, an unholy license [*reason*]; your national greatness, swelling vanity [*blind pride*]; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery-- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages .There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety [*decency*] of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

**Source:** Douglass, Frederick. "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" (Speech), 1852.

## Perspective 4: We Must Celebrate America

As an immigrant who has chosen to become an American citizen, I believe that America, despite what the critics say, is a great country. America provides an amazingly good life for the ordinary guy. Rich people live well everywhere, but what distinguishes America is that it provides a remarkably high standard of living for the "common man." A country is not judged by how it treats its most affluent citizens but by how it treats the average citizen.

The newcomer who sees America for the first time typically experiences emotions that alternate between wonder and delight. Here is a country where everything works: The roads are clean and paper-smooth; the highway signs are clear and accurate; the public toilets function properly; you can even buy things from the store and then take them back. The place is full of countless unappreciated inventions: quilted toilet paper, fabric softener, cordless telephones, disposable diapers, roll-on luggage, deodorant. Some countries, even today, lack these conveniences.

Critics of America allege [*argue*] that the history of the United States is defined by a series of crimes--slavery, genocide--visited upon African-Americans and American Indians. Even today, they say, America is a racist society. The critics demand apologies for these historical offenses and seek financial reparations [*amends, compensation*] for minorities and African-Americans. But the truth is that America has gone further than any society in establishing equality of rights. Racism continues to exist in America, but it exists in a very different way than it did in the past. Previously, racism was comprehensive or systematic; now it is more episodic [*occasional*].

America offers more opportunity and social mobility than any other country. In much of the world, even today, if your father is a bricklayer, you become a bricklayer. Not so in America. Success stories of people who have risen up from nothing are so common that they are unremarkable.

My conclusion is that America is the greatest, freest, and most decent society in existence. It is an oasis of goodness in a desert of cynicism [*negativity*] and barbarism. This country, once an experiment unique in the world, is now the last best hope for the world. History will view America as a great gift to the world, a gift that Americans today must preserve and cherish.

**Source:** D'Souza, Dinesh. "What's Great About America" (article), 2006.