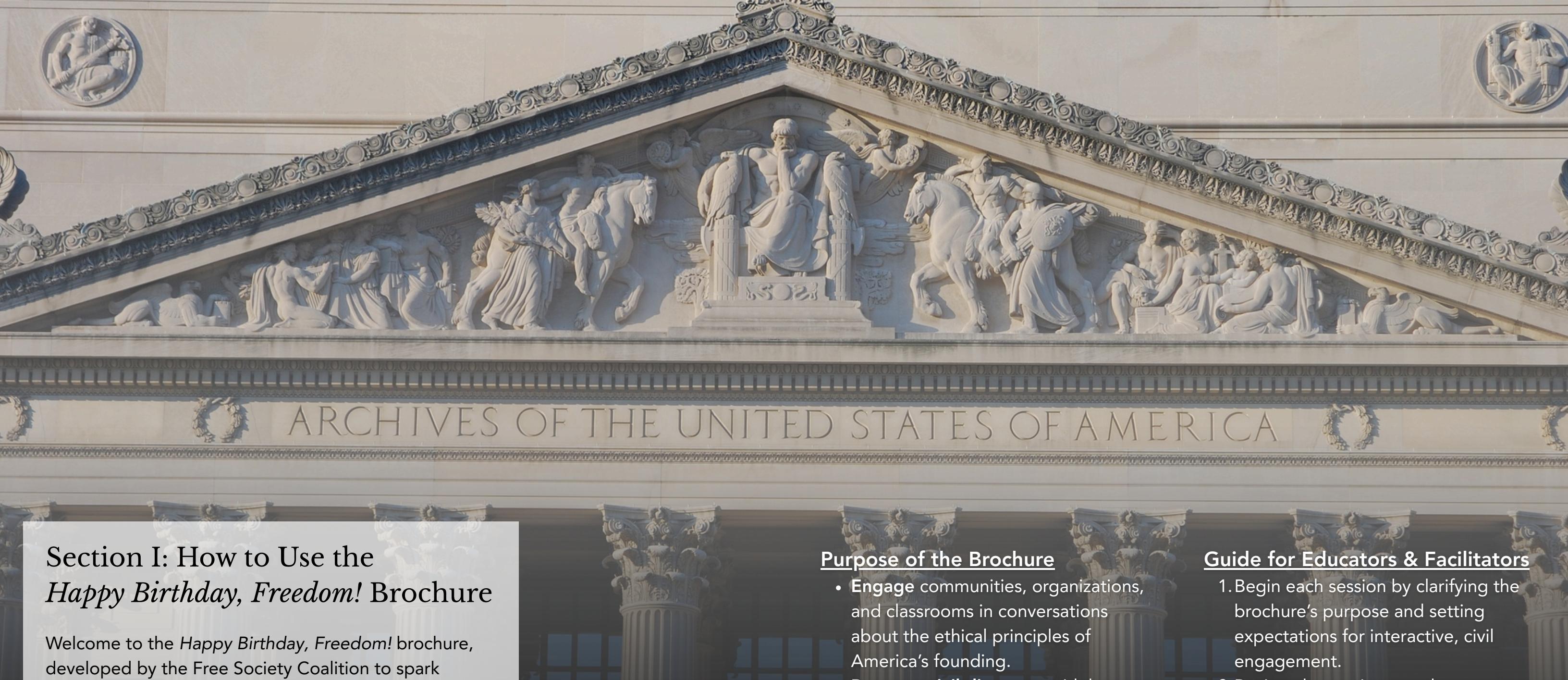


Happy Birthday,
Freedom!



FREE SOCIETY
COALITION
FOR LIBERTY & RESPONSIBILITY



Section I: How to Use the *Happy Birthday, Freedom!* Brochure

Welcome to the *Happy Birthday, Freedom!* brochure, developed by the Free Society Coalition to spark thoughtful dialogue, independent thinking, and civil, candid discussion about America's founding principles and the values we're celebrating on America's semiquincentennial anniversary.

This brochure is designed as a starting point for educational programs and discussion groups that wish to engage in structured conversations centered on the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence—the values that brought the Founders together.

Learn more at FreeSocietyCoalition.org

Purpose of the Brochure

- **Engage** communities, organizations, and classrooms in conversations about the ethical principles of America's founding.
- **Promote civil discourse** with honest, open-minded, and respectful discussions in pursuit of truth.
- Encourage rigor and **independent thought** and explore **diverse viewpoints** to deepen understanding of others' views.
- Uncover personal values to share across ideological differences—such as respect for **individual dignity**.
- Deepen appreciation for the unifying power of the Founders' ideals.

Guide for Educators & Facilitators

1. Begin each session by clarifying the brochure's purpose and setting expectations for interactive, civil engagement.
2. Review the sections to plan your journey of discovery—encouraging independent thought and honest reflection.
3. Promote Socratic inquiry: ask probing questions, challenge assumptions, and empower participants to form their own conclusions.
4. Approach differences with empathy—steering discussions toward recognition of both shared values and differences.

Section II: Introduction

Thank you for taking time to read this brochure. Its authors hope you will view it as the start of an amazing journey of discovery—perhaps rediscovery is a more appropriate term—of ideas and events that are as exciting today as when they first occurred. Buckle up, engage your mind, and enjoy the adventure!

In 2026, Americans will mark the 250th anniversary of the country's birth. It's called a semiquincentennial, and it might well be the one 4th of July you will never forget.

Friends and family may ask you many years from now, "What did you do on—or in preparation for—that historic day?" Hopefully, you won't have to admit, "Nothing. I just watched fireworks."

Our brochure will succeed if it serves as an intellectual stimulant. It is meant to encourage thought, discussion, and debate.

If it inspires you to think hard about the ideas that gave birth to the nation, and to make those ideas more relevant and exciting, it will serve its purpose.

The birth of America on that July day in 1776 was a seminal event in world history. That is not to say that the Declaration of Independence and the later Constitution were perfect. Not even the Founders believed that. They saw their work as the beginning of an experiment.

They encouraged citizens to work toward "a more perfect union." They were not of like mind on all issues, but they united around core principles and signed their names to them on that first 4th of July.

A full quarter of a millennium later, we are the Americans who will be able to say, "I was alive for the 250th and I did not let it pass without doing something meaningful in celebration."

In April 2024, about 50 Americans convened in Philadelphia to discuss what we might do to encourage a thoughtful observance of the semiquincentennial. Like the Founders, we didn't agree on everything, but we sought consensus. We represented multiple points of view.

Some were people of faith, while others were secular in perspective. Some were more interested in economics than politics, others vice versa. But all of us firmly believed that the ideas that gave birth to the country are worth reflection. Can they serve to unite us once again as a people, or should we toss them out and start all over?

We produced a document we call "The Philadelphia Declaration." You can read it later in this brochure. In any event, we encourage you to think for yourself and come to your own conclusions about the ideas that shaped America's founding.

In the run-up to the Declaration of Independence, American colonists engaged in rigorous debate. Separation from the British Empire was the result, but upstream from that issue were matters concerning rights, laws, the purpose of governments, and much more.

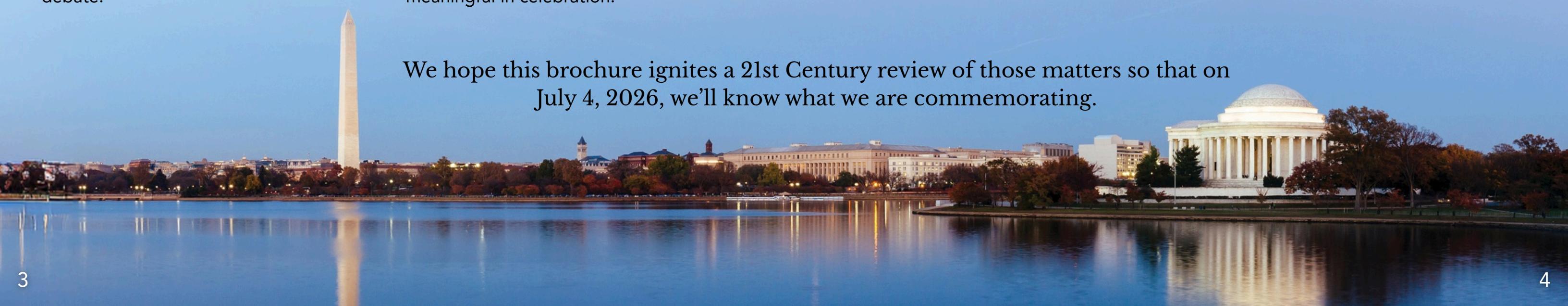
Do you think America's 250th should simply be about fireworks and parades, or do you see it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to engage in the world of ideas? We hope for the latter.

This brochure is a thought-starter and platform for you to begin an exciting intellectual journey of discovery.

— **Free Society Coalition, January 2026**

FreeSocietyCoalition.org

We hope this brochure ignites a 21st Century review of those matters so that on July 4, 2026, we'll know what we are commemorating.



Section III: Understanding the Declaration of Independence

Three hundred years before the founding of America, Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "Nothing can be loved or hated unless it is first understood." The greatest polymath of the Renaissance was urging us to comprehend first, and only then formulate opinions.

That should be self-evident, but many Americans have strong opinions about the Declaration of Independence, with little understanding of the thoughts that went into the document. It is precisely those thoughts that the Free Society Coalition wants Americans to carefully examine and contemplate—to create the foundation for each of us to independently develop informed opinions.

We focus here on the Declaration's evergreen ideas. They frame the ethical foundations for individual liberty. They demonstrate the uniting power of this intensely moral appeal. The Founders came together to express their views of human nature and the purpose of government with the following words:

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...

The 56 signers recognized the profound risks they faced, including loss of property, the safety of their families, and potential public execution. Despite the risks and their different religious and political beliefs, they united to declare publicly:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.



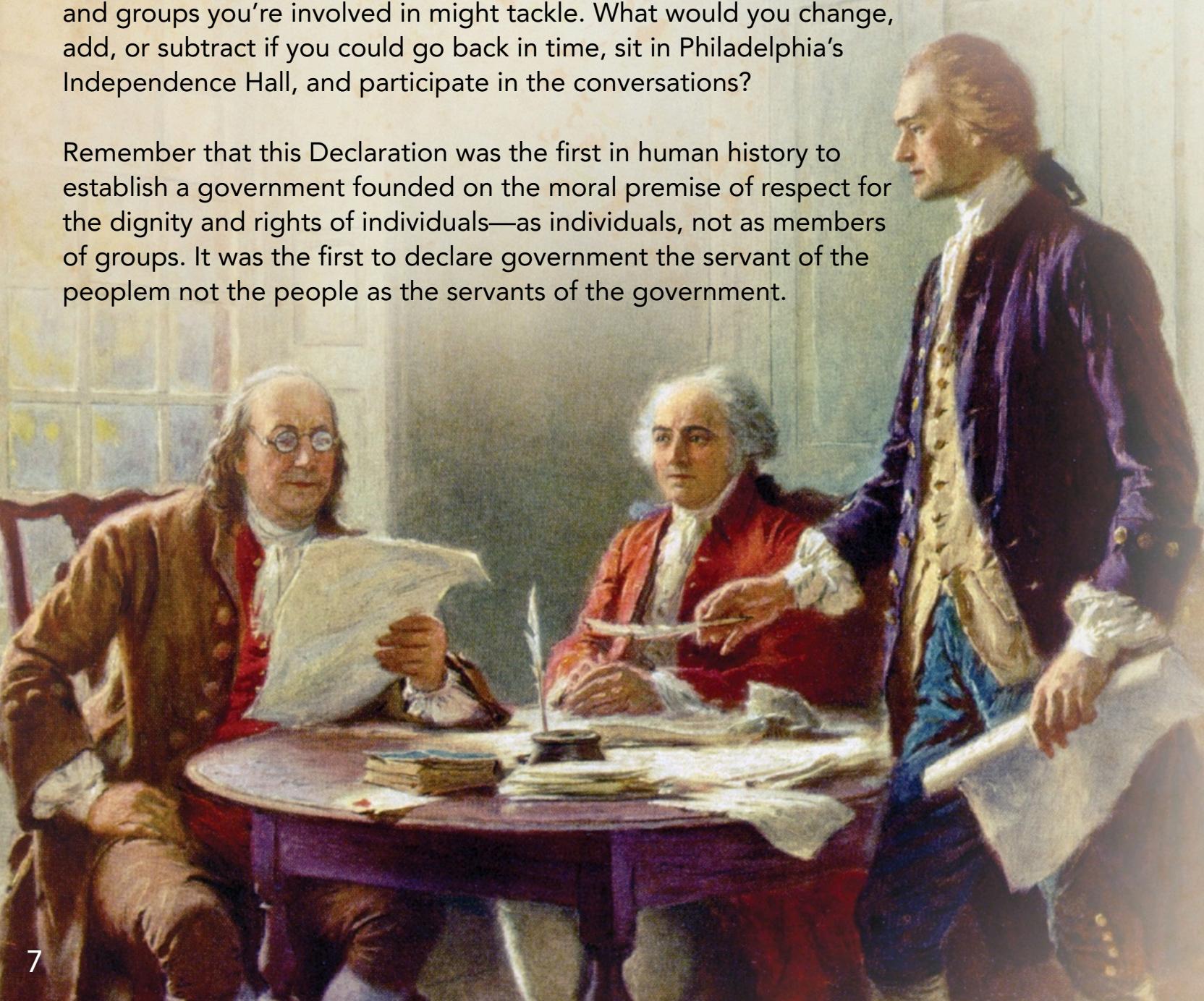
Section IV: Examining the Declaration

Today, would Americans be willing to pledge “our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” to protect what the Founders have placed in our care?

Now, in accordance with da Vinci’s advice, let’s attempt to understand the Founders’ claims and the moral values the Founders embedded in the Declaration. When we think and discuss, we put our minds to work. We cannot emphasize too strongly how important it is for you to think deeply and then decide what you believe.

The Founders expected citizens to ponder, to question and challenge, and to consider how the principles they wrote about might apply to future events and issues. That’s why we offer some queries that you and groups you’re involved in might tackle. What would you change, add, or subtract if you could go back in time, sit in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, and participate in the conversations?

Remember that this Declaration was the first in human history to establish a government founded on the moral premise of respect for the dignity and rights of individuals—as individuals, not as members of groups. It was the first to declare government the servant of the people not the people as the servants of the government.



Discussion Questions

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident”

How do we know the truth? This theme invites us to explore the nature of truth and the philosophical basis for asserting basic principles as obvious or self-evident.

“[A]ll Men are created equal”

What do we mean by equal, and in what respects are we equal? Before the law? In appearance, talent, character, opportunities? Is this an aspirational claim or a claim of fact? This theme explores the essentials of what is and isn’t common among people and inherent in human nature.

“[E]ndowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”

What are rights, where do they come from, who has them, and why? This theme delves into the nature of rights—whether they are inherent in each individual or granted by permission. What do we mean by unalienable and what are the implications for individual liberty, freedom of conscience, and justice?

“Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

Why liberty? What is liberty and why is it first to follow life? Why the “Pursuit of Happiness” and not simply “Happiness”? This theme examines the philosophical meaning behind these rights and examines their connection to individual flourishing, ethics, enlightened self-interest, and societal well-being.

“To secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men”

What is the purpose of government? What is the significance of the Declaration’s reference to securing, rather than granting, rights? This theme challenges us to reexamine the role of government in safeguarding freedoms. In what way is this purpose compatible with promoting the public good?

“Deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”

What are “just powers”? Can a democratic majority override an “unalienable right”? How should we make laws and choose leaders? This theme addresses democratic principles, such as representative government, elections, civic engagement, and statesmanship.

Section V: What Do You Believe?

- What do I, as a citizen, think of these ideas and of the beliefs and moral values they depend on?
- How can we achieve “equal rights” given our history of state-approved slavery and unequal treatment of women, gay people, and minorities?
- In assessing the thoughts and contributions of the Founders, do you think they moved the needle of human history in a positive direction? How have the principles of the Declaration of Independence advanced equal liberty for all?
- What would a consistent application and articulation of these principles entail? Could the answer to that inquiry provide the foundation for our civic purpose and inspire individual liberty, personal ethics, and a vibrant, exciting, and life-affirming future?



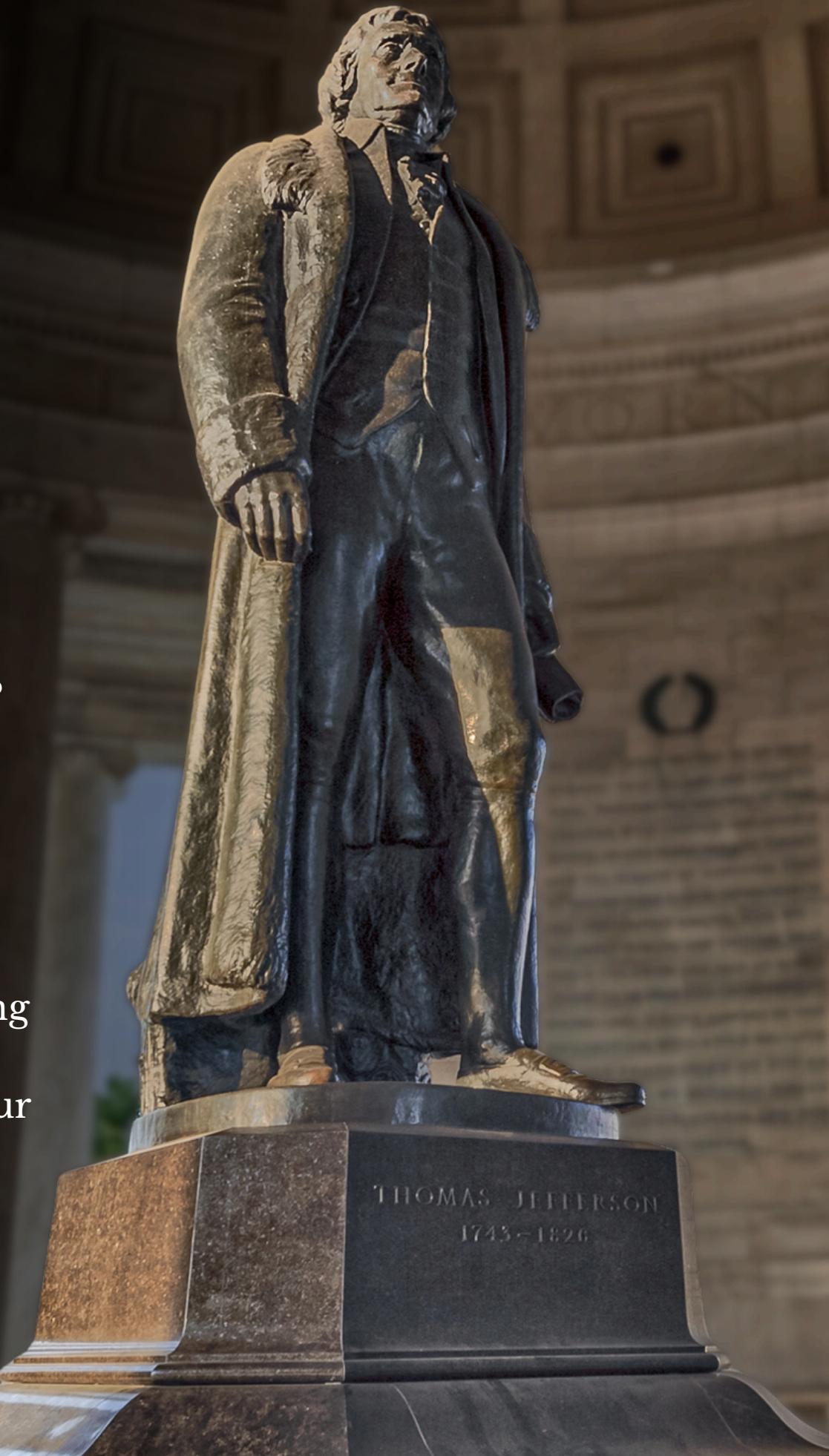
Section VI: The Philadelphia Declaration

The “Philadelphia Declaration” is a document composed by the Free Society Coalition as a modern interpretation of the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

Our new document may prompt such questions as: Does it successfully express the Founders’ thinking? What parts do you agree and disagree with? The answers do not demand conformity; we call instead for careful, reasoned, and independent thinking.

By examining and challenging this modern version, we gain insights to clarify our own views. Use this section as one example to encourage thoughtful reflection on the relevance of these ideas in contemporary society.

“We believe that adopting these values will be the source of progress for our country and others throughout the world—a vibrant, exciting, and life-affirming future.”



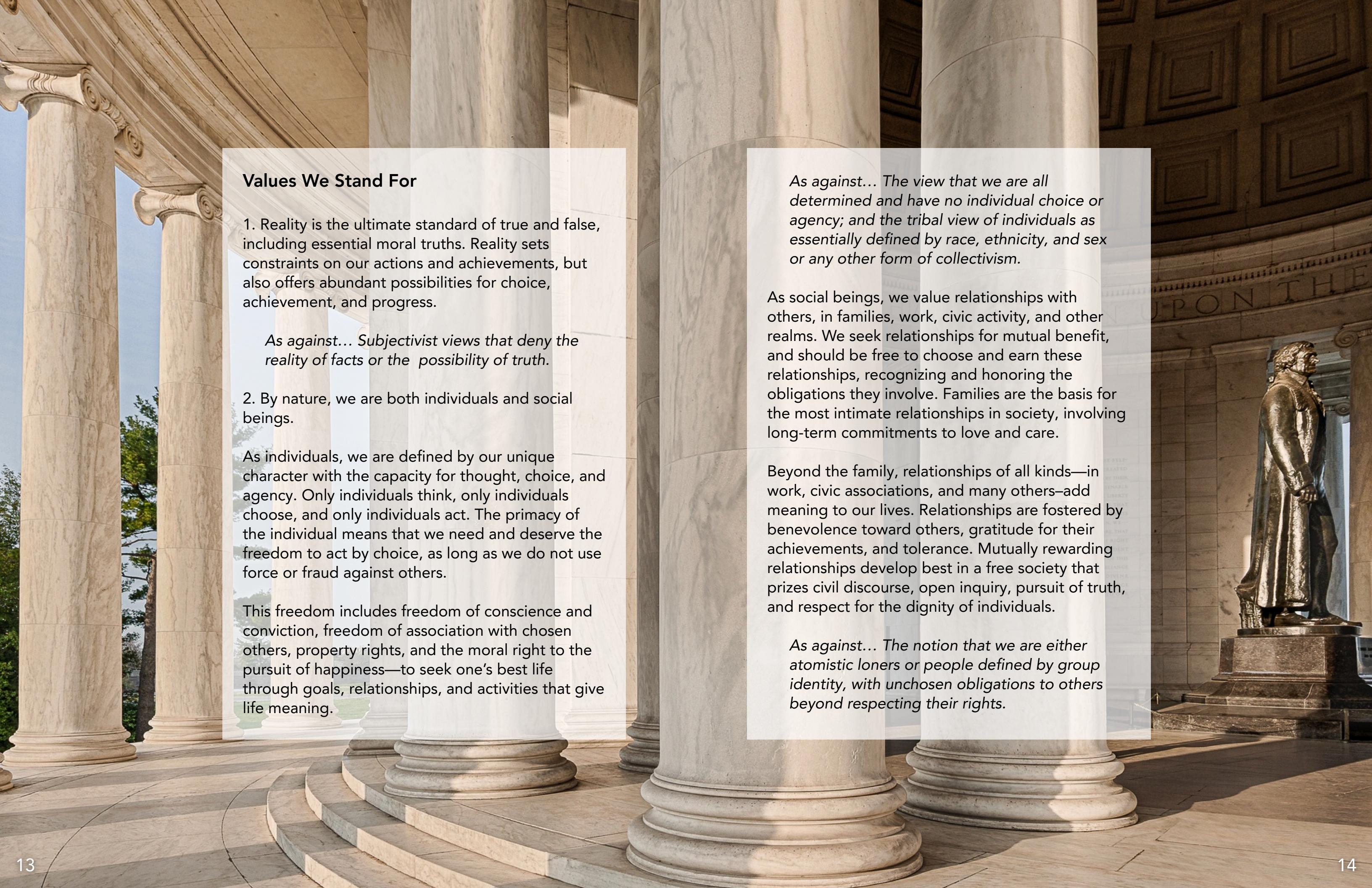
Preamble

In April of 2024, a group met in Philadelphia to discuss the direction of our country. For all its flaws, America was founded as a “melting pot” that aligned religiously and culturally diverse populations around a shared set of beliefs about the dignity and autonomy of all people.

This unity is eroding. We are becoming polarized between collectivist views on both left and right. The people who formed the Free Society Coalition came together to recommit to the unifying, founding beliefs of this country, based on the rights of individuals, bringing to them a modern understanding and articulation.

Many of us differ in fundamental convictions; some of us have secular worldviews, others have religious views. But despite those differences, we share values that allow us to cooperate for mutual benefit. These values have made America great and have inspired millions worldwide.

We believe in the morality of political freedom as the true habitat for humanity. We also share a conviction that freedom cannot be sustained without an ethical base. We unite to clarify, celebrate, and promote the values we share as the ethical foundation necessary to challenge the polarization, nihilism, and authoritarianism that threaten our freedom. We believe that adopting these values will be the source of progress for our country and others throughout the world—a vibrant, exciting, and life-affirming future.

A photograph of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., featuring its iconic Corinthian columns and the steps leading up to the entrance. The columns are made of light-colored stone and are set against a clear blue sky.

Values We Stand For

1. Reality is the ultimate standard of true and false, including essential moral truths. Reality sets constraints on our actions and achievements, but also offers abundant possibilities for choice, achievement, and progress.

As against... Subjectivist views that deny the reality of facts or the possibility of truth.

2. By nature, we are both individuals and social beings.

As individuals, we are defined by our unique character with the capacity for thought, choice, and agency. Only individuals think, only individuals choose, and only individuals act. The primacy of the individual means that we need and deserve the freedom to act by choice, as long as we do not use force or fraud against others.

This freedom includes freedom of conscience and conviction, freedom of association with chosen others, property rights, and the moral right to the pursuit of happiness—to seek one's best life through goals, relationships, and activities that give life meaning.

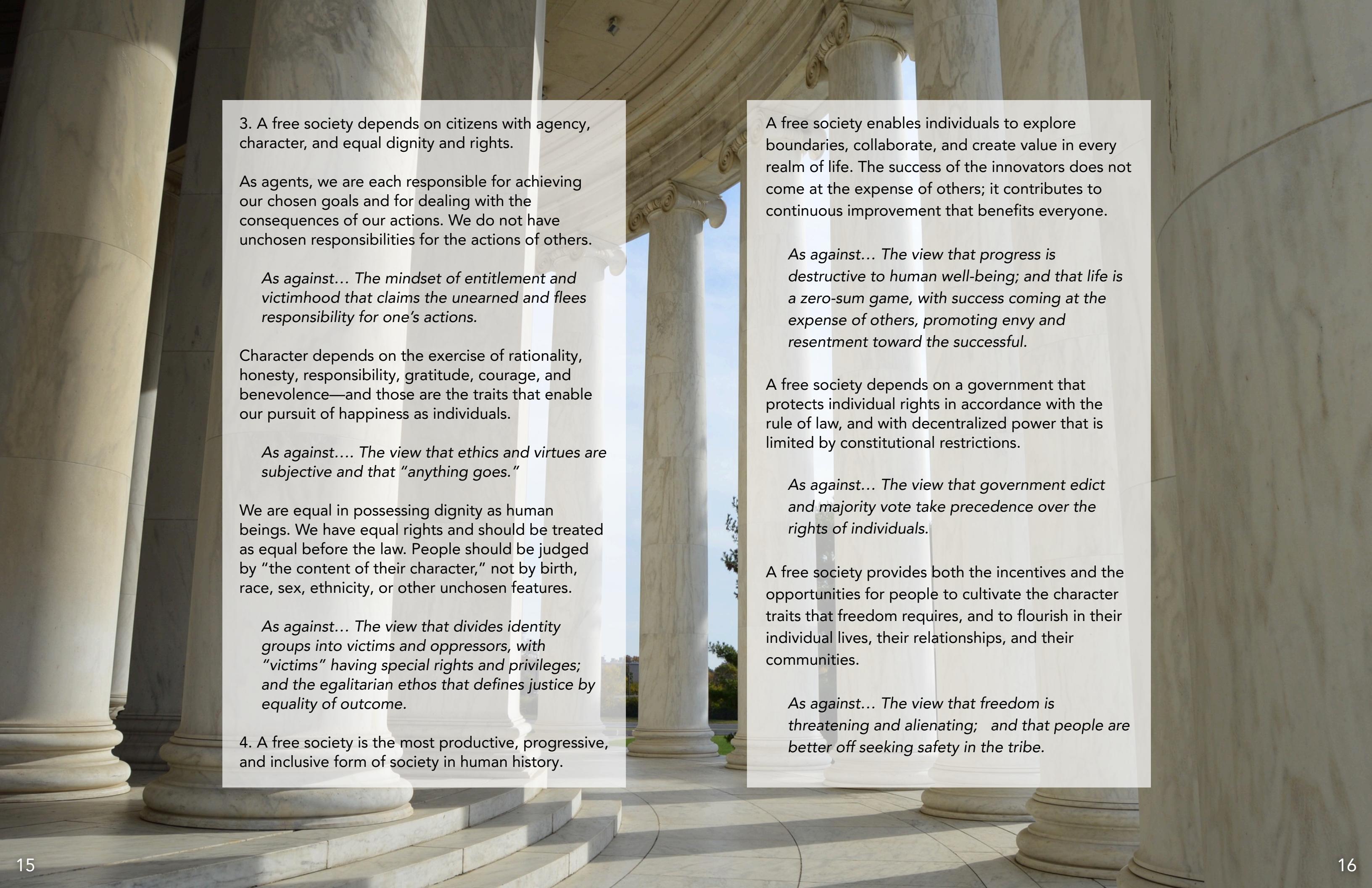
As against... The view that we are all determined and have no individual choice or agency; and the tribal view of individuals as essentially defined by race, ethnicity, and sex or any other form of collectivism.

As social beings, we value relationships with others, in families, work, civic activity, and other realms. We seek relationships for mutual benefit, and should be free to choose and earn these relationships, recognizing and honoring the obligations they involve. Families are the basis for the most intimate relationships in society, involving long-term commitments to love and care.

Beyond the family, relationships of all kinds—in work, civic associations, and many others—add meaning to our lives. Relationships are fostered by benevolence toward others, gratitude for their achievements, and tolerance. Mutually rewarding relationships develop best in a free society that prizes civil discourse, open inquiry, pursuit of truth, and respect for the dignity of individuals.

As against... The notion that we are either atomistic loners or people defined by group identity, with unchosen obligations to others beyond respecting their rights.





3. A free society depends on citizens with agency, character, and equal dignity and rights.

As agents, we are each responsible for achieving our chosen goals and for dealing with the consequences of our actions. We do not have unchosen responsibilities for the actions of others.

As against... The mindset of entitlement and victimhood that claims the unearned and flees responsibility for one's actions.

Character depends on the exercise of rationality, honesty, responsibility, gratitude, courage, and benevolence—and those are the traits that enable our pursuit of happiness as individuals.

As against.... The view that ethics and virtues are subjective and that "anything goes."

We are equal in possessing dignity as human beings. We have equal rights and should be treated as equal before the law. People should be judged by "the content of their character," not by birth, race, sex, ethnicity, or other unchosen features.

As against... The view that divides identity groups into victims and oppressors, with "victims" having special rights and privileges; and the egalitarian ethos that defines justice by equality of outcome.

4. A free society is the most productive, progressive, and inclusive form of society in human history.

A free society enables individuals to explore boundaries, collaborate, and create value in every realm of life. The success of the innovators does not come at the expense of others; it contributes to continuous improvement that benefits everyone.

As against... The view that progress is destructive to human well-being; and that life is a zero-sum game, with success coming at the expense of others, promoting envy and resentment toward the successful.

A free society depends on a government that protects individual rights in accordance with the rule of law, and with decentralized power that is limited by constitutional restrictions.

As against... The view that government edict and majority vote take precedence over the rights of individuals.

A free society provides both the incentives and the opportunities for people to cultivate the character traits that freedom requires, and to flourish in their individual lives, their relationships, and their communities.

As against... The view that freedom is threatening and alienating; and that people are better off seeking safety in the tribe.

VII: Suggested Readings

We cite only a tiny fraction of the immense volume of literature and commentary about America's founding principles, with the purpose of inspiring you to learn more.

Barry Brownstein, "What Thomas Jefferson Meant by 'The Pursuit of Happiness'"
<https://tinyurl.com/4crncx98>

Frederick Douglass, "Letter to His Former Master."
(excerpt prepared by Stephen Hicks),
<https://tinyurl.com/bdfstp89>

Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William Johnson (1823)
(excerpt prepared by Stephen Hicks),
<https://tinyurl.com/mubee2df>

Kerry McDonald, "Why You Should Read 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' to Your Kids."
<https://tinyurl.com/mrxfw86d>

Roger Pilon, On the Moral Foundations of America
<https://tinyurl.com/8sdc9mds>

Lawrence Reed, "America's Republic: How the Great Experiment Came About (and How We Keep It)." <https://tinyurl.com/49584rr2>

Lawrence Reed, "Yes, America's Birthday Deserves to be Celebrated" <https://tinyurl.com/26yjkc7v>

More on FreeSocietyCoalition.org

Section VIII: Call to Action

The Free Society Coalition invites you to help lead a renewed commitment to the principles of America's founding—honoring the people, ideas, and sacrifices that made possible the freedoms and prosperity we enjoy.

Here are a few meaningful ways—big and small—that show the world the creativity and dedication Americans bring to this worthy cause:

- Visit FreeSocietyCoalition.org to share ideas, sign up for updates, request printed copies of this brochure, and share the digital version with your network.
- Commit to set a personal example of civil discourse in your interactions.
- Use this brochure to:
 - Talk with your family and friends about why civil discourse and personal liberty matter—especially why they matter to our children and grandchildren.
 - Encourage schools and other organizations you support to plan meaningful events to commemorate America's 250th anniversary.
- Write a letter to the editor and post on social media your thoughts about civil discourse, individual rights, freedom, and the shared values that united the Founders and speak to the best in each of us.
- Host a gathering in your home or community to explore the meaning and significance of liberty and how freedom was rare throughout history.

In joining this effort, you may discover that advancing liberty is among the most meaningful contributions one can make to the future of a free society.

Act today. Together, we can help renew the promise of individual liberty—for this generation and those yet to come.



Who We Are

The Free Society Coalition is composed of people who are proud of our mission—to promote a thoughtful, nationwide and philosophical re-examination of our nation's founding principles. Learn more at FreeSocietyCoalition.org

Members of the FSC Board of Governors are affiliated with FSC in their individual capacities, not as representatives of any organization.

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Each member has expressed a commitment to help promote the Happy Birthday, Freedom! brochure to engage diverse audiences in open inquiry, civil dialogue, and independent thinking about the principles of America's founding.

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FREEDOM IS ESSENTIAL TO
HUMAN PROGRESS AND
CANNOT BE SUSTAINED
WITHOUT AN ETHICAL BASE.

CIVIL DISCOURSE PROVIDES
THE FRAMEWORK TO DISCOVER
THE VALUES WE SHARE AS THE
MORAL FOUNDATION
NECESSARY TO CHALLENGE
THE POLARIZATION, NIHILISM,
AND AUTHORITARIANISM THAT
THREATEN OUR FREEDOM.

LEARN MORE AT
FREESOCIETYCOALITION.ORG

Cover Image: Independence Hall, Philadelphia—where
the principles of free society were set in motion.