

Points of View

Before You Read

Before Revolutionary patriots put pen to paper to draft the U.S. Constitution in 1787, Colonial leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin studied other systems of government, including an example flourishing close to home: the Iroquois Confederacy. This political group had what Jefferson and Franklin were searching for—a constitution infused with the basic principles of democracy and federalism.

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the League of Five Nations, was a union of the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Mohawks (the Tuscaroras joined later). Around 1500, so the legend goes, a Mohawk visionary named Dekanawida convinced the nations to unite in order to establish peace and to protect “life, property, and liberty.” Thanks to the constitution they created, the confederacy became a formidable power. By 1750, it numbered about fifteen thousand people, and Iroquois hunters and warriors ranged over one million square miles.

The oldest living constitution. The Iroquois Constitution, which still governs the Iroquois today, is regarded as the world’s oldest living constitution. It gives member peoples equal voice in the nations’ affairs, spells out a system of checks and balances, and guarantees political and

religious freedom. Most amazing by European standards of that time, the Iroquois Constitution grants extensive political power to women, who hold the right to nominate and impeach chiefs.

The strength of five arrows. The Iroquois Constitution survives as a brilliant American political and literary work, filled with rich symbolism. Dekanawida had envisioned a huge evergreen “Tree of Peace” whose spreading roots represented the five nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). After unification of the nations, a symbolic tree was planted. An eagle atop the Tree of Peace, clutching five arrows, symbolizes the Iroquois Confederacy—and it’s the image we see pictured on the back of the U.S. quarter.

In 1988, to mark the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, Congress passed a joint resolution stating that “the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself.” Like five arrows bound together, the Iroquois political and literary legacy is entwined forever with the ideals that continue to shape American life.

POLICY STATEMENT

from The Iroquois Constitution

Dekanawida

Tree of Great Peace

I am Dekanawida and with the Five Nations’ Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace. I plant it in your territory, Adodarhoh, and the Onondaga Nation, in the territory of you who are Firekeepers.

I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long

Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords.

We place you upon those seats, spread soft with the feathery down of the globe thistle, there beneath the shade of the spreading branches of the Tree of Peace. There shall you





sit and watch the Council Fire of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and all the affairs of the Five Nations shall be transacted at this place before you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords, by the Confederate Lords of the Five Nations.

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south, and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength.

If any man or any nation outside the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace and make known their disposition to the Lords of the Confederacy, they may trace the Roots to the Tree and if their minds are clean and they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the Confederate Council, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger threatening he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy.

Leaders

The Lords of the Confederacy of the Five Nations shall be mentors of the people for all time. The thickness of their skin shall be seven spans—which is to say that they shall be proof against anger, offensive actions, and criticism. Their hearts shall be full of peace and goodwill and their minds filled with a yearning for the welfare of the people of the Confederacy. With endless patience they shall carry out their duty and their firmness shall be tempered with a tenderness for their people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodgment in their minds and all their words and actions shall be marked by calm deliberation.

Clans

The lineal descent of the people of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation.



They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother.

Symbols

Five arrows shall be bound together very strong and each arrow shall represent one nation. As the five arrows are strongly bound this shall symbolize the complete union of the nations. Thus are the Five Nations united completely and enfolded together, united into one head, one body, and one mind. Therefore they shall labor, legislate, and council together for the interest of future generations.

War and Peace

I, Dekanawida, and the Union Lords, now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the cavity thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underearth currents of water flowing to unknown regions we cast all the weapons of strife. We bury them from sight and we plant again the tree. Thus shall the Great Peace be established and hostilities shall no longer be known between the Five Nations but peace to the United People.



Points of View

Before You Read

Elizabeth Cady (1815–1902) was studying law in her father’s office when she became aware of the inequalities that women lived with (including the fact that she was not permitted to go to college or to obtain a law license). In 1840, Cady married abolitionist and lawyer Harry Stanton. (The promise to obey was omitted from her wedding vows.) The two reformers spent their honeymoon in London at the World Anti-Slavery Convention. There she met Lucretia Mott, another active women’s rights advocate. The women were denied admission to the

London convention solely because of their gender. As a result, the two began to plan a women’s rights convention. This historic convention was eventually held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, where Stanton lived with her husband and children. At the convention, Stanton read the Declaration of Sentiments to the assembled participants. Modeled on Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, Stanton’s version called for women to be given both voting rights and equal treatment under the law.

POLICY STATEMENT / SPEECH

from Declaration of Sentiments of the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention

Elizabeth Cady Stanton



When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. . . .

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of

man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.¹

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded² men—both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

1. **inalienable right to the elective franchise:** right to vote, which cannot be taken away.

2. **degraded** *adj.*: disgraced; corrupted.



Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, another advocate for women's rights.

He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.

He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being, as she can commit many crimes with impunity, provided they be done in the presence of her husband. In the covenant³ of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master—the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement.⁴

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes, and in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given, as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women—the law, in all cases, going upon a false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands.

After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single, and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.

3. **covenant** *n.*: binding agreement; compact.

4. **chastisement** *n.*: punishment.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.⁵ He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known.

He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic⁶ authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

He has usurped the prerogative⁷ of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject⁸ life.

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement⁹ of one half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States . . .

5. **remuneration** *n.*: payment.

6. **Apostolic**: of the Pope; papal.

7. **prerogative** *n.*: exclusive right or privilege.

8. **abject** *adj.*: hopeless.

9. **disfranchisement** *n.*: act of taking away the rights of citizenship, especially the right to vote.



A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled



When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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 rights¹; 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 shown 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,² begun at a distinguished³ period and pursuing invariably the same object, evinces⁴ a design to reduce them under absolute despotism,⁵ it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new

certain

1. **inalienable** (in·āl'yən·ə·bəl) **rights**: rights that cannot be taken away.
2. **usurpations** (yūs'sər·pā'shənz) *n. pl.*: acts of unlawful or forceful seizure of property, power, rights, and the like.
3. **distinguished** *v.* used as *adj.*: clearly defined.
4. **evinces** *v.*: indicates; makes clear.
5. **despotism** *n.*: rule by a tyrant or king with unlimited power.

Vocabulary

prudence (prūs'dəns) *n.*: sound judgment.
transient (tran'shənt) *adj.*: temporary.



guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to expunge their former systems of government. The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations, among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.

He has refused his assent⁶ to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable⁷ to them, and formidable to tyrants only.⁸

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly and continually for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected, whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise, the state remaining, in the meantime, exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without and convulsions within.

He has endeavored⁹ to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization¹⁰ of foreigners,

6. **assent** *n.*: agreement.

7. **inestimable** *adj.*: invaluable; priceless.

8. **formidable . . . only**: causing fear only to tyrants.

9. **endeavored** *v.*: attempted; tried.

10. **naturalization** *n.*: process by which foreigners become citizens.

Vocabulary

constrains (kən·strānz') *v.*: forces.

expunge (ek·spunj') *v.*: erase; remove.

candid (kan'did) *adj.*: unbiased; fair.

alter

repeated

all having



refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has suffered the administration of justice totally to cease in some of these states refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made our judges dependent on his will alone for the tenure¹¹ of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, by a self-assumed power and sent hither swarms of new officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us in times of peace standing armies and ships of war without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others¹² to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; for protecting them by a mock trial from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; for imposing taxes on us without our consent; for depriving us [] of the benefits of trial by jury; for transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offenses; for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province,¹³ establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these states; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here withdrawing his governors, and declaring us out of his allegiance and protection.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries¹⁴ to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun

obstructed / by

in many cases

colonies

by declaring us out of his protection, and waging war against us.

11. **tenure** *n.*: length of time that an office is held.

12. **others** *n. pl.*: members of British Parliament and their supporters and agents.

13. **neighboring province**: Quebec in Canada.

14. **mercenaries** *n. pl.*: professional soldiers hired to serve in foreign armies.

Vocabulary

abdicated (ab'di·kāt'id) *v.*: given up responsibility for.



with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy¹⁵ [] unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow citizens taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has [] endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions of existence.

He has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture and confiscation of our property.

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people

scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally

excited domestic insurrection among us, and has

15. *perfidy* *n.*: betrayal of trust.

Vocabulary

confiscation (kän'fis·kā'shən) *n.*: seizure of property by authority.

The Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776 (detail) by John Trumbull (1756–1843). Oil on canvas.

Yale University Art Gallery, Trumbull Collection.



Thomas Jefferson



who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium¹⁶ of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative¹⁷ for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die,¹⁸ he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress¹⁹ in the most humble terms: Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injuries.

A prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a [] people who mean to be free. Future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad and so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered and fixed in principles of freedom.

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend a jurisdiction over these our states. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here, no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expense of our own blood and treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league and amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: and, we [] appealed to their native justice and magnanimity as well as to the ties of our common



Writing materials used at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

free

an unwarrantable / us

have
and we have conjured²⁰ them by

16. **opprobrium** (ə·prō'brē·əm) *n.*: shameful conduct.

17. **negative** *n.*: veto.

18. **fact of distinguished die**: clear stamp or mark of distinction. Jefferson is being sarcastic here.

19. **redress** *n.*: correction for a wrong done.

20. **conjured** (kən·jōord') *v.*: solemnly called upon.

Vocabulary

magnanimity (mag'nə·nim'ə·tē) *n.*: nobility of spirit.



kindred to disavow these usurpations which were likely to interrupt our connection and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity,²¹ and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, reestablished them in power. At this very time too, they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenaries to invade and destroy us. These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur and of freedom, it seems, is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness and to glory is open to us too. We will tread it apart from them and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces²² our eternal separation []!

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, [] do in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these states reject and renounce all allegiance and subjection to the kings of Great Britain and all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them; we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us and the people or parliament of Great Britain: And finally we do assert and declare these colonies to be free and independent states, and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.

And for the support of this declaration, [] we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

The Declaration thus signed on the 4th, on paper, was engrossed²³ on parchment, and signed again on the 2d of August.

21. **consanguinity** (kän'sanj·gwin'ə·tē) *n.*: kinship; family relationship.

22. **denounces** (dē·nouns'iz) *v.*: archaic for "announces, proclaims."

23. **engrossed** *v.*: written in final draft.

Vocabulary

renounce (ri·nouns') *v.*: give up.

acquiesce (ak'wē·es') *v.*: accept quietly.

would inevitably

We must therefore

and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,

colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved;

with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence,