Unit 1 Question 3

3. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, its author, wrote that the object of the Declaration was “not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of…but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take.” What were the main ideas or principles set forth in the Declaration?

• Jefferson freely acknowledged that the Declaration borrowed from the works of “Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” What are some of those ideas borrowed and used in the Declaration?

• Do these principles and arguments have relevance in the world today? Explain your answer.

Martin:

The main ideas set forth in the Declaration of Independence are: the access of all individuals to certain rights, the duty of government to protect said rights, and the ability of the governed to remove and establish a new government that would better protect those rights if they are infringed upon by the government. According to the Declaration of Independence “all men are created equal” and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among the rights put forth in the Declaration are those of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. The idea that human beings were entitled to natural rights was not original in 1776, as the concept was first introduced an entire century earlier by the philosopher John Locke. In The Second Treatise of Government Locke stated that “that state of nature ought a law of nature to govern it… no one to harm another in his life, health, liberty, and possessions.” By excluding the terms “health” and “possessions” from their document, the framers sought to remove the impression that they were just breaking away from the British Crown in order to gain more land and resources. The colonists staunchly believed that provocative legislation such as the Declaratory Act, the Townshend Acts, and the Intolerable acts had violated not only the rights granted to them by the English Bill of Rights, but also the god-given rights of every human being.

Marcus:

In addition to setting forth the rights that every human being is entitled to, the Declaration of Independence set forth the concept that it was the government’s duty to protect those rights in relation to the social contract. When Thomas Jefferson stated that “governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” he borrowed political thought from the school of classical republicanism, which was set forth by both Aristotle and Cicero. In Politics Aristotle describes how “The majority must be supreme, and that whatever the majority approve must be the end and the just. Every citizen, it is said, must have equality” In doing so, Aristotle argues that the actions of the government must arise from a majority decision of the governed. This idea of self governance and election was regarded paramount to the colonists, and as a result they included the means of voting for and electing members of the government in the U.S. Constitution (Article 1, Section 2, Clause 1) and (Article 2, Section 1, Clauses 2-3).

Ryan:

The third main idea set forth in the Declaration of Independence was that which gave the people the right to “alter or abolish” a Government that has failed to protect their rights. Throughout the second half of the Declaration, Jefferson makes note of several cases where the King overstepped his boundaries as a sovereign. One the most important claims set forth in the latter part of the Declaration was that King George had “deprive[ed] us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury”. By focusing on the specific case of King George’s withdrawal of Trial by Jury as granted to all Englishmen by the 39th article of the Magna Carta, the framers outlined to the world how the King had withdrawn rights that he had earlier promised. The 13 colonies invoked this right to withdraw their consent, and in turn, created their own nation.Withdrawing the consent of the governed has also been seen within the past decade as noted by the most recent Arab Spring, in which the constituents of various Arab countries including Egypt and Libya overthrew leaders who they believed to dictators who were violating their natural rights.

Many, if not all, of the principles and arguments set forth in the Declaration still pertain to modern society. One can look at the various treaties and constitutions that arose during the period following World War Two in order to see clear parallels between what the founders believed to hold true in 1776 and what the citizens of the world held to be true after the humanity had been ravaged by the most destructive war ever known to man. In Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is written that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person” While not exactly the same as the ideas proposed by Locke or Jefferson, the idea that every individual is entitled to live their life freely has continued into this day.