



Rather than a reality set in stone, the United States has always been a project in formation. *The People Speak* presents a view of American history in motion, telling the stories of ordinary people who have defined democracy through their powerful words and actions. This exciting film traces the stories and experiences of everyday Americans through their own words, emphasizing the idea that democracy is not a spectator sport but is a reflection of the efforts of citizens who have pushed the nation to live up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. This special features dramatic interpretations of documents, letters, diaries and other primary sources from U.S. history read by Matt Damon, Benjamin Bratt, Marisa Tomei, Don Cheadle and others. Musical performances by Bruce Springsteen, John Legend, and others also introduce viewers to our nation's iconic protest songs.

Every year on September 17th, Constitution Day, Americans reflect on the meaning of the founding documents and the rights they affirm. *The People Speak* offers moving examples of how people throughout U.S. history have fought to see these ideals come to life for all people. Slave narratives, testimonies of striking workers, and civil rights protestors are among the moving and poignant proclamations included in this 90-minute film. Based on the books *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and *Voices of a People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, these performances give students an active and fresh perspective on the people and events that have changed the course of our nation's history. By watching and listening to these performers, students will gain new insights into critical turning

points in American history, and the ways average citizens have agitated for transformation. These gripping, shocking, and triumphant stories can inspire students to learn more about the past and to remind them that participation in civic culture is as American as apple pie.



Author, Howard Zinn



Matt Damon



Marisa Tomei



John Legend



Bruce Springsteen

Curriculum links

The People Speak would be an excellent fit with American History, American Studies, Race & Ethnic Relations, Popular Culture, and Ethics courses. It would be a great film to show during Constitution Day events and activities. It is appropriate for high school and college students. Educators may want to stream clips from this program to their classes and pair them with the written versions of the performances. Many of these performances will be available online at www.History.com/thepeoplespeak.

Vocabulary

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.History.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- | | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| abolitionism | civil disobedience | impiety | resistance |
| agitator | free speech | opprobrium | self-evident |
| chattel | habeas corpus | posterity | |

Discussion questions

1. What was the major message of the Declaration of Independence? How is that document compared with the Constitution in this film? Do you agree with this comparison? Discuss.
2. Why was the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution? How did this come about? What do you think are the most important rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights?
3. What are some of the ways slaves resisted their status as "property"? What were some of the risks of their actions?
4. This film discusses the harsh treatment of Native Americans throughout U.S. history. What were some of the ways Native Americans attempted to maintain their freedom?
5. Many of the struggles of people of color and women to achieve full citizenship rights in American society are documented in this film. What are some of the stories that stood out to you, and why?
6. One of the key themes in this film is the roles workers have played in fighting for better labor conditions. What are some examples in this program of the ways ordinary people pushed for change in the workplace? Do you think these methods were effective? Discuss.
7. The Great Depression was a very difficult time in U.S. history, but it also inspired many people to work toward change. What is an example of a voice from the Depression era included in this film?
8. This film details the many ways Americans have defined patriotism. Among the stories in this program, which one do you think most exemplifies the spirit of patriotism, and why?
9. The civil rights movement was a watershed era in U.S. history as many Americans took up the cause to guarantee freedom and equality for all people. What are some examples from this film, or from your own studies, of efforts for change during this era?
10. If you could add one document, song, or poem to be included in *The People Speak*, what would it be, and why?

Excerpt from “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (July 5, 1852) by Frederick Douglass

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; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – 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.

Discussion questions

1. Who was Frederick Douglass? What role did he play in the anti-slavery movement?
2. What do the words impudence, bombast, and impiety mean in the context of this document?
3. This document was written in 1852. Do you think Douglass felt differently about the 4th of July after slaves were freed? Discuss.

Extended activities

1. This program features performances from key moments and turning points in U.S. history. Ask students to pick one of the readings or songs from this program and locate the words or lyrics online or at the library. Then, ask students to practice reading or performing the document or song. Have students perform these pieces to the larger class or group. Students may also want to organize performances of these pieces for the school or community.
2. Protest songs have played a crucial role in social movements throughout U.S. history. Ask students to break up into groups of three or four. Then, ask them to research a social movement or era of change in U.S. history and identify the role music played in these events (examples: anti-slavery songs, Depression-era labor songs, civil rights movement hymns, etc.). Ask students to create a visual or written presentation which incorporates the lyrics of a protest song, and write a short essay of 1-2 pages which describes the song and the context in which it was written. Music or performance students can also choose to perform these pieces in front of the class or community.
3. This film emphasizes the roles ordinary Americans have played in making change throughout American history. In small groups, ask students to design posters



Kerry Washington

inspired by one of the events or eras covered in this film. These posters can be designed in PowerPoint format, on posterboard, or other formats. Students can include a motto or phrase which captures the sentiments or efforts of the person or group on which they have chosen to focus.

4. Civic participation is a key theme that runs throughout this film. Throughout U.S. history, youth movements have been among the most engaged efforts to make social change. After viewing this film, students can think about ways they can become active in their own communities, through volunteer work, joining student government, or recording the stories of community members who have participated in movements for change in their local area. Whatever their interests or political perspectives, encourage students to develop informed perspectives, read more primary sources from U.S. history, and get involved!

Websites & books

BOOKS

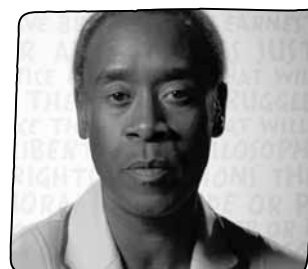
- Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty! An American History, Volumes 1, 2, and Sourcebook* (WW Norton, 2006).
- Holton, Woody. *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (Hill and Wang, 2007).
- Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Collins, 1980).
- Zinn, Howard and Anthony Arnove. *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (Seven Stories Press, 2004).

WEBSITES

- HISTORY™** site on *The People Speak*: www.History.com/thepeoplespeak
- The official site of Voices of a People's History organization: www.peopleshistory.us
- Milestone documents from the National Archives: www.ourdocuments.gov
- The American Memory Project from the Library of Congress: memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html



Josh Brolin



Don Cheadle