



DIALOGUES IN DEMOCRACY
Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in the 21st Century

DISCUSSION GUIDE

"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."
-The Declaration of Independence

"Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is a phrase we hear all the time. Those rights were obviously foremost at the Founders' minds at the birth of our nation. But what does it mean to us today? Perhaps even more important, what are the rights, responsibilities and expectations of citizens in 21st Century America? Is the great American republican experiment, epitomized by the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights that was debated at the House of Burgesses in Colonial Williamsburg, at risk in today's and tomorrow's America—a nation that will grow from 300 million to 400 million inhabitants over the next forty years? These questions will frame the dialogue we will undertake at our convocation in Williamsburg, Virginia.

 **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CITIZEN?**

The Founders didn't just form a new nation. They created a new kind of society in which the *people*, not monarch, was sovereign. Henceforth, the people would govern themselves. It would be a self-governing republic.

With few exceptions, including the tiny Greek city-states, every person on the planet before 1776 had been born, lived, and died as a "subject"—subject to monarchs, priests, dictators, and the like—all claiming sovereignty by divine right or force. The American Revolution was, indeed, revolutionary because the Founders used natural law to claim sovereignty for the people, thus making them "citizens." And citizens, in turn, granted government certain authorities to do things that the people couldn't do individually. The people, not the government, now held all rights.

As members of this new republic, without the absolute power of the monarchy to serve as a guide, citizens inherently became shareholders in the nation. Citizens were encouraged to act virtuously and selflessly, or as Samuel Adams put it: "a Citizen owes everything to the Commonwealth." Now that

*Colonial
Williamsburg*

citizens actually *were* the government, they would be called upon to serve in it, vote for it, change it (if necessary) and preserve it. Should they be bound to respond to the call? And if they did, were they obliged to become more well-informed? Once they did so, were they obliged to weigh the common good against the individual good in their decision-making? And how much should they use government to help fulfill these responsibilities to fellow citizens once these responsibilities were defined?

Those were tough questions for America's earliest citizens as they grappled with how to shape their role in this nascent country. They become increasingly complex questions today, as we consider how citizens' voices can be heard in a mass society where instead of just 30,000 persons in a Congressional District, we are now approaching 800,000.



Throughout our convocation, we will take on a number of key questions that were as relevant to citizens in colonial times as they are today. For example, how much money should we contribute for services? How do we define patriotism? How much power should citizens entrust in government to regulate economic life? How much should government regulate issues related to values and faith?

As we consider our responsibilities as citizens, we must also consider our rights. Thomas Jefferson laid out our right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," drawing upon thinkers like philosopher John Locke and patriot George Mason, whose Virginia Declaration of Rights was adopted on the very spot where we will gather for our modern-day convocation. Mason's vision was also the precursor to our Bill of Rights, which are our most basic, protected rights. But beyond those rights, as our world has become more complex, globalized, and interconnected, do citizens have the right to expect other protections from government? Do we have the right to have clean air and water, as protected by the government? Do we have the right to have our jobs protected? To have certain values protected above others?

Additionally, are we Americans, beginning to treat government as if it had rights? And is there a fundamental risk to the republic if we do so?

THE CONVOCATION

We will open our conversation at the historic House of Burgesses with a plenary session on the current challenges America faces. For the remainder of Friday and most of Saturday we will move into small group discussions exploring the rights and responsibilities of citizens and their expectations of government when taking on those challenges. Saturday's final small group session will include a bit of work—drafting a modern-day Declaration of Citizenship. And our culminating event will be a plenary session back in the House of Burgesses, to debate and expand upon our draft Declaration—or perhaps competing Declarations.

AMERICA'S CHALLENGES TODAY

(Friday morning plenary session. Moderator: Jim Lehrer of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer)

Against the historical backdrop, as we begin our dialogue on Friday morning, we will want you to consider the following question: What is the biggest challenge facing America today? And how

should we citizens, and in turn our government, address that challenge? You are all coming to Williamsburg with a range of perspectives—from different geographic locations and walks of life. Be sure to include that local perspective, and relevant—even personal—examples, in your thinking and response.

“LIFE”: How much responsibility do citizens have for each other? To what degree should government reflect those responsibilities?

(Small Groups Session #1. All small group sessions will be moderated by: Elizabeth Brackett, Elizabeth Farnsworth, Paul Solman, and Ray Suarez of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer)

Our country and our government are vastly larger than they were in the Founders’ day. Instead of a small, largely rural society of some three million people, we now have more than 300 million, largely urban and suburban residents, living in a technologically-connected, globalized world. Our earliest budgets were relatively modest, and the Founders, like Alexander Hamilton, defined the initial role of federal government to include defending the nation, maintaining the peace, regulating commerce and negotiating treaties. Other functions of society, like helping the poor and taking care of the elderly, were the responsibility of the individual, the family, the church or other community groups. Today, our government’s role has expanded and our budget covers a wider array of programs. Our total budget has grown to around \$2.5 trillion, meaning federal spending is more than \$21,000 per U.S. household.

Some people believe that government should continue to do what it does now—provide a baseline of support that takes care of the basic needs of American citizens and others who are in this country legally. These basic services include education for all citizens through high school; health care for the poor and elderly; and retirement support for those who have worked in paying jobs in this country. Many supporters of this perspective think America can only remain a great country by ensuring the education and health of its citizens. There are others who believe that, given the income inequality in our country, government can and should provide even more support to its citizens so that there is a level playing field for success in this country—including services like universal healthcare coverage, college-level educational support, daycare, and even housing for our poorest citizens. Yet there are others who believe that government should stay out of the business of providing such services and let individuals, families, churches, synagogues and other religious and secular community groups take on those responsibilities.



Moreover, among those who believe government should take on an active role in the creation, funding and oversight of vital “safety net” programs, there is debate as to what level of government—federal, state or local—should take this on. Does local government understand best how to care for its constituents? Or is the budgetary and oversight power of the federal government necessary to ensure all needs are met?

Here are some questions to consider:

- Is it government’s role to provide “the basics” for life, and if so, what are “the basics”?
- Should there be a social safety net of any kind? If so, what should be in it? Should it be provided to all or just the very poor?

- Is it the sole responsibility of government to maintain the safety net? And if so, the responsibility of government at what level?
- Should government take on as little as necessary when it comes to these issues and let individuals, families, and religious and other community organizations take a leading role?
- Is income inequality a concern of the government?
- How directly involved should citizens be in overseeing their schools?
- How much should individuals be responsible for their own healthcare and retirement?
- Have citizens handed over responsibilities to the government? Does that mean that the role of citizens will decline in the 21st Century as expectations of government services grow?

 **“LIBERTY”:** What is the relationship between individual liberty and collective security in the midst of 21st Century tensions?

(Small Groups Session #2)

The Founders declared their liberty against a British monarchy wielding authority across an ocean. Americans consideration of liberty today is decidedly more complex and must be weighed against a backdrop of a post-9/11 world, with the threat of terrorism from rogue states and organizations.

When it came to war, the Founders clearly intended for the government—Congress and the President—to hold responsibility for waging war, maintaining peace, and thus safeguarding our freedom. And while some Founders saw a federal standing army as dangerous and wanted to rely on local/state militias, today we regard having prepared armed forces as a major responsibility of the federal government.



In the next 50 years, America will likely face a broad series of international challenges, including nuclear proliferation; the growth of rogue terror organizations; the potential waning of American status or dominance in the world community; and unrest brought about by Third World poverty, religious strife, and a global cultural divide.

Currently up for debate, as we begin to face those challenges, is to what degree citizens can disagree with government when it is working to safeguard our freedom. Also disputed is how much authority the federal government should have to restrict certain civil liberties in pursuit of homeland security. Some believe our civil liberties can never be tampered with, while others believe a temporary or minor loss of these liberties is a small price to pay for security.

How much input citizens have in the way government chooses to approach our international challenges and wield the power citizens have bestowed is an important element of the discussion. How much should those in government listen to citizens as it determines whether to emphasize working with our Allies or go it alone; spreading democracy around the globe; or focusing solely on preserving peace within our borders? And how much should those in government listen to citizens when we deciding whether and how to deploy forces to preserve our liberty?



Here are some questions to consider:

- Is it possible to fight a war on terrorism without giving the executive branch some leeway when it comes to our civil liberties?
- How do we define patriotism? And are there limits to dissent?
- In a post-9/11 world, should the executive branch have free rein to make command decisions, or must the executive branch consult with and listen to its citizens before entering into and during military conflict?
- Is it legitimate for citizens to expect government to protect our military preeminence among nations? And does it follow, then, that citizens must be willing to pay the price?
- Isn't America a powerful model of democracy, and therefore shouldn't our government seek to spread democracy throughout the world?



“PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS”: What is government's responsibility for maintaining our economic preeminence in the world?

(Small Groups Session #3)

At the birth of our nation, the Founders were certainly concerned with issues of fair trade and the notion that government would, indeed, be charged with regulating commerce. But the Founders could not have envisioned the economic interconnectedness of each country that we find in the 21st Century world. Globalization poses new challenges to government, businesses and individuals. The choices our government makes about whether and how to regulate free or fair trade and outsourcing of jobs, as well as its tax policy, affects the nation's economic growth and stability.



There are those who believe that government should be as activist as possible when it comes to boosting our economy and preserving American jobs. There are a number of measures that government can take on in this regard. For example, government could protect American workers from outsourcing by changing tax law that may encourage companies to move jobs offshore. Government can also provide subsidies to certain entities, like farmers, to ensure American competitiveness in the world market. And government can impose tariffs—or taxes—on imported goods to protect domestic producers or industries.

Critics of this type of intervention believe that government should stay out of the market's way and allow it to determine which manufacturers or farmers or financial services will thrive. They say free trade will open up new markets for us to sell our goods and services and will ultimately make the U.S. more competitive and innovative as businesses adapt to keep America competitive. And all of this leads to economic growth and better-paying jobs.

Here are some questions to consider:

- How much power should citizens entrust in government to regulate economic life?
- Is governmental regulation a necessary feature of the globalized world?
- What should be the nature of government business regulations? Should they be for economic or social ends?
- Should government intervene in American business to preserve American jobs or a particular industry (like the family farm)? If so, what should be the scope of that intervention?
- Should government intervene to protect the environment? How much, and at what expense to business and consumers? How much burden should we expect government to transfer to employers when it comes to issues such as healthcare, the environment, immigration, and income inequality?

“PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS”: How can we balance the individual good vs. the common good in our pursuit of happiness?

(Small Groups Session #4)

Some say “live and let live,” or that Americans should have the right to pursue happiness as long as that pursuit does not harm another person. But drawing the distinction between a personal and public choice in today’s diverse and globalized world is increasingly complex. For example, commuting to work in a large car rather than taking public transportation can impact our shared environment; and choosing to hire a non-documented alien worker can impact the livelihood of a fellow citizen. Some might argue government should strictly regulate these choices. But there are others who argue these are personal decisions that government should stay out of.

Some would also argue that government has every right to make regulations about what constitutes a legal family unit or whether children should say prayers in schools, while others would say government has no business getting involved in these matters.

Another important question in the discussion of the balance between individual and common good is:



what are the responsibilities of citizenship? There are those who believe citizens should have legal responsibilities, perhaps including military service, public service, and even the obligation to vote. Others think that these are perhaps moral responsibilities that should be fostered among all (or nearly all) citizens. There are still others who believe American citizens’ moral responsibilities should include becoming informed about public policy issues. But there are some who do not think we should worry about creating legal requirements or inducements for civic participation. They believe citizens who decline to participate in civic life have every right to make that choice.

Here are some discussion questions to consider:

- How much should government regulate issues related to values and private decisions such as abortion, school prayer, same-sex marriage? Even if they impact others?

- How much responsibility should citizens take on when it comes to choices that may impact our shared environment? For example when it comes to water and land use, transportation and housing choices, and consumer selections?
- When it comes to the environment, how much responsibility do we have to American citizens of the future? To the citizens of the world?
- What, if any, legal responsibilities of citizenship should there be in America? What are elements of citizenship that just might be encouraged?
- If we have a society of spectator citizens, who do little and are not much involved, who do not exercise any real political choices, does this lack of civic participation matter? If so, what can we do to increase citizen engagement?

DECLARATION OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY: What should be the rights and responsibilities of American citizens today?

(Small Groups Session #5)

We will ask participants to draft a modern-day Declaration of Citizenship, based on conversations at the convocation. We'll provide more details about this session when you arrive.

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON CITIZENSHIP

(Sunday morning plenary session. Moderator: Jim Lehrer of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer)

Back at the House of Burgesses, we will debate our draft Declaration of Citizenship and conclude with some parting thoughts.

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