

Question Set 1:

Founding Ideals and Their Meaning

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

1. Justice Stephen Breyer opens *The Promise of America* by contrasting nations shaped by deep, enduring divisions with those that grow and adapt while staying anchored in shared founding documents and values. Does the United States succeed in being the second kind of nation? Why or why not?
2. What idea or argument from the essay you read stood out most to you, and why?

CLOSE READING AND INTERPRETATION

3. Jeffrey Rosen traces competing understandings of “one people”—with Jefferson viewing America as a collection of states and Hamilton as a unified nation. Looking across American history, which vision do you think has been more influential?
4. Danielle Allen argues that while the principle of equality was present in the Declaration, it has been built over time by successive generations of ordinary people claiming its promise. Should we understand equality primarily through the Founders’ words or through how those words have been used and expanded over time?
5. Robert P. George describes liberty not only as freedom from government, but as “freedom for virtue,” rooted in the pursuit of a good and honorable life. What does this understanding add to the meaning of liberty?

EXPLORING TENSIONS

6. Gordon Wood describes a transformation in the idea of “consent of the governed,” from a system in which power was transferred to representatives to one in which the sovereign people retained their authority and merely “loaned” it to government. How important is this shift, and does it reflect how American democracy functions today?
7. The essays highlight tensions between liberty, equality, and self-government. Which of these tensions feels most significant or unresolved today?

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

8. Eric Slauter reminds us that the Declaration’s “self-evident truths” did not shape history on their own but had to be taken up by real people. Does the Declaration continue to shape our political culture today? How might its ideals be applied in everyday life?
9. What responsibilities do individuals have in sustaining the principles of a constitutional democracy?

CLOSING REFLECTION

10. Justice Neil Gorsuch describes the Declaration as a “constant reminder of who we aspire to be,” and calls America a “work in progress.” What does it mean to you to take part in that ongoing work?