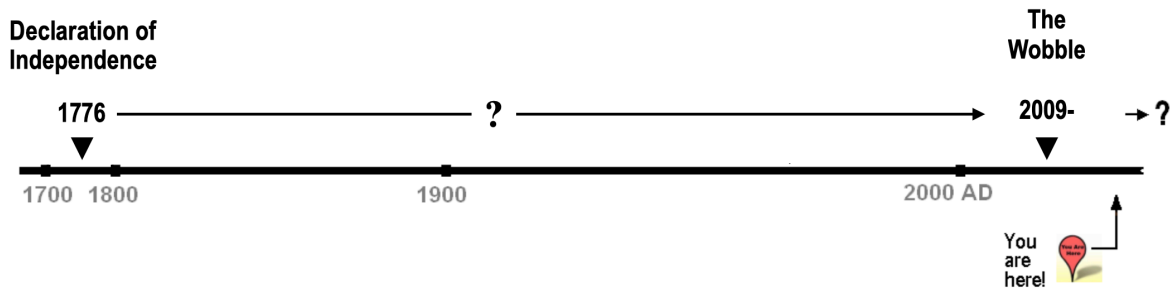


D. The Birth of the United States: The Declaration of Independence (1776)

1. The story of the United States begins with the *Declaration of Independence* by America's leaders, known as the Founding Fathers, on the 4th of July, 1776.
2. The *Declaration*, written mainly by Thomas Jefferson, stated the reasons why a new country known as the "United States of America" needed to be created, by breaking away from the control of its mother country, Great Britain.
3. The *Declaration* states that governments must protect the "inalienable" *natural rights* of individuals to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." ("Inalienable" means that rights cannot be made "alien" or separate from a person. They are part of a person's nature as a human being.)
4. This was the original American social contract, and the beginning of the story of the United States, which now goes at the beginning of the timeline:



E. The Inheritance of Slavery

1. Although the *Declaration of Independence* said that "all men are created equal" and that all individuals possess the same natural rights, the colonies that became the United States had been formed in a time when slavery was still practiced throughout the world and was considered normal.
2. To the modern student of history, living in a time when slavery is no longer viewed as normal, and seems plainly wrong, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a time when that was not true.
3. Even so, starting in ancient times, in an unbroken succession of cultures from ancient Egypt & Mesopotamia, including Greece and Rome, and through to medieval Europe, slavery was normal.
4. People became slaves when tribes or kingdoms conquered one another, or as peasants fell into debt, or did not have enough food to survive and chose to sell themselves to someone richer and more powerful in order to live whatever manner of life they could.
5. Ancient laws like the famous *Code of Hammurabi* ("an eye for an eye") simply explain how slavery works.
6. It is surprising for many people to learn that the Christian Bible and texts of other religions like Judaism and Islam treat slavery as merely a fact of life.

7. By the time of the American Revolution, the use of slave labor had ended in some colonies, but in others, especially in the southern colonies, where growing crops such as tobacco and cotton required large numbers of laborers, slavery had been continued.
8. The peculiar challenge of the founding of the United States as a country with a revolutionary social contract of natural rights announced in the *Declaration of Independence* was what to do about inheritance of slavery.

F. A Moral Compromise in the Name of a “More Perfect Union”

1. After the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776, five of the *states*—New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts—abolished slavery within their *states*.
2. In eight of the original thirteen states, however, slavery continued at that time.
3. This difference, among others might have led the colonies to become separate *countries*.
4. Based on their knowledge of history, however, the Founding Fathers realized that such an arrangement would not last. Powerful countries like Britain, France, and Spain would take advantage of them and possibly even conquer some of them. (A famous phrase captures this problem: “United we stand, divided we fall.”)
5. The top priority of the Founding Fathers, therefore, was to unite the colonies into a single country permanently.
6. The new set of laws they made is known as the Constitution (1787) created a “federal” government, with a congress of representatives to make laws for the whole country, along with a president, and a court system.
7. In creating the *Constitution* to make a single, permanent country, they did not make laws about slavery. They allowed each state to decide what to do.
8. Slavery was also left out of the *Bill of Rights*, created in 1789, which protects the rights of American citizens (such as freedom of speech, and the “right to bear arms”).
10. The challenge of American history is to explain how the original American social contract of natural rights *and* slavery was abandoned in favor of the social contract of today, which focusses on what are commonly known as “civil rights.”

