

The U.S.A. at 250:

The Declaration of Independence – What Does It Mean to You?

Lawyers have always played a significant role in American democracy, and we'd like to hear your thoughts about what the Declaration of Independence means to you as attorneys today. Consider submitting a brief essay of up to 250 words.

BY DAN D. GARTZKE

This year, 2026, marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, approved by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776.

While it is not a foundational document in the same sense as the Constitution, the Declaration gave some of the framework for the principles adopted later as we embarked on the start of a nation, and with which we still grapple to realize today.

Lawyers played a significant role in the drafting and passage of the Declaration of Independence. Four of its five authors were lawyers, including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – future presidents. And 25 of the 56 signatories were lawyers.

Of course, the U.S. looks much different today, 250 years later. But lawyers continue to play a significant role in American democracy. And we'd like to hear your thoughts about it.

The State Bar of Wisconsin has decided to use this opportunity to look to you, our members, to voice your thoughts on what the Declaration of Independence means to you as attorneys. Over the next few months, we will be collecting brief essays of up to 250 words.

The first step is for you to re-read the Declaration of Independence and select the phrase or passage that is most meaningful to you. Here, for you to consider, is just the opening preamble:

"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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of

Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

The Declaration of Independence is an aspirational document and much has changed in the 250 years since it was written. What do you find most significant, as a 21st-century attorney and citizen, when reading the Declaration of Independence now? What promises have been fulfilled, and which are we still working on?

Do you think those truths are so self-evident today, and what are the lessons for our society? Are we fulfilling the ideals set for future generations?

We will be collecting your short essays through March, and more details will follow on how to submit them. We will publish as many as we can in the June edition of *Wisconsin Lawyer*, just ahead of the July 4, 2026, celebration. Others that cannot fit will be available online.

We will select essays with an eye to the greatest diversity of views. We want essays from across our 25,000 membership – new lawyers, retired members, judges, government lawyers, rural attorneys, and especially all political persuasions.

We want to see what the relevance of this powerful document is today. We are looking for essays that provoke thought, and hopefully discussion.

We hope that this project will generate meaningful conversations among our members, and perhaps the wider public. Please join us in celebrating the United States at 250. **WL**



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