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# **Big Ideas in U.S. History**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<b>Lecture Notes</b> .....	<b>S1</b>
<b>Student Handouts</b> .....	<b>H1</b>
<u>Culminating Activities</u>	
Discussion Questions .....	<b>1</b>
Extension Activities .....	<b>1</b>
Related Web Sites .....	<b>2</b>
<u>Quiz</u>	
Multiple Choice Quiz: <i>Big Ideas in U.S. History</i> .....	<b>4</b>
Multiple Choice Quiz: <i>Answer Key</i> .....	<b>11</b>

## INTRODUCTION

This PowerPoint®-based unit presents a survey of the concepts, ideals, policies, and plans which have had a significant impact upon American history. It's not exactly an "intellectual history"—often, that term makes people think of bone-dry, overly academic books about maddeningly abstract theories presented largely outside their larger social and historical context. Instead, *Big Ideas in U.S. History* approaches the subject from a simpler standpoint, looking at what ideas have motivated Americans in the past to take action and have also made a lasting impression in the public consciousness. The presentation thus focuses on the "big" part more than the "idea" part, examining historical motivation and impact rather than the finer points and nuances of each concept.

Each slide in the presentation contains a suggested lecture script that introduces the idea, puts it in its proper historical context, describes important events or developments related to the idea, and explains the idea's importance in American history. Use this script as a starting point for what you want to convey to your students; hopefully, it should be easy enough to adapt to your specific teaching objectives.

The unit proceeds chronologically from the American Revolution to the Bush Doctrine. You can integrate this unit into your curriculum in a number of ways; here are a few suggestions:

- Use it as a semester or year-end review unit. This would work especially well for AP U.S. History students soon before the exam.
- Pick out a section of 10–15 slides at a time to augment, introduce, or wrap-up a particular curriculum unit you already use.
- Position the unit as a short-term project by having students rotate through a computer station and go through the presentation on their own. You can then assess students either by using the multiple-choice test included with the unit or by having them give oral presentations on a single idea, a cluster of ideas, or several ideas that are related thematically but aren't chronologically adjacent to one another.
- You can also use *Big Ideas* to motivate students to dig deeper; the presentation can function as a jumping-off point for a more in-depth research project.

This unit is not intended to be comprehensive: in all likelihood, you'll probably wonder why some ideas were left out and why others were included. Again, feel free to adapt the presentation to your own specific needs—skip some slides, add a few of your own, change around the order of the slides, or anything else you think will help your students. Ultimately, the most important of the ideas in this unit is that of the "big idea" itself because it offers a compelling and thought-provoking approach to both conceptualize and study U.S. history. Good luck!

Kerry Gordonson  
Editor

## What Is a “Big Idea”?

- A “historical motivator”
- Offers a solution to a pressing problem
- A completely original concept or a novel and innovative way to use existing concepts
- Big ideas are not necessarily “good” or “bad”



Ideas can be many things: a thought or opinion, how people conceptualize something, an imaginary ideal, or a concrete plan. In history, a “big idea” is something that captures people’s imaginations, excites them, and influences their what they do and how they behave. A big idea is a “historical motivator”: it spurs people to take action; it provides a solution to an important or urgent problem; it sets a precedent or example that others may choose to follow. Big ideas can either be completely original, or they can take existing concepts and use them in a novel and innovative way. Big ideas are not necessarily “good” or “bad,” and can function in a variety of ways. They can work to benefit society as a whole, they may work to benefit a certain group or individual, or they can work to the detriment of a certain segment of the population. Above all, big ideas make a deep impression and cause people to think in ways they may not have before.

# Why Study Big Ideas?



People of the past

- What were their everyday lives like?
- What did they think and believe?
- What really mattered to them?
- What motivated them to take out-of-the-ordinary actions?

History is not just the study of events, nor is it a collection of names, dates, and places. An important part of history involves understanding why things in the past happened as they did. To accomplish this, a historian needs to be able to see the past as people at the time saw it: the conditions in which they lived, what their daily life was like, and what society's norms and rules were. For the vast majority of people in the past, life centered around earning a subsistence in order to survive: farming, factory work, trading, hunting, and other such occupations took up most of their time, energy, and thought. It took something major, something really important to get them to divert their effort and attention away from putting food on the table and putting roofs over their heads. Studying big ideas lets us know what really mattered to these people. It shows us the ways in which they thought. It identifies things they considered important enough to alter—and even risk—their lives for. Finally, it provides insight into that elusive concept of “national character” and reveals ideals and values that many label as distinctly “American.”

## Moving Toward Independence



- Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*
- Richard Henry Lee: "...free and Independent States."
- Continental Congress creates a "Committee of Five"

Bullet #1 In early 1776, Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*, which presented several arguments in favor of independence. It became a runaway bestseller soon after publication. Many claim that Paine's work did not necessarily develop new arguments for independence; however, it did present arguments in a manner that was easy to understand for many less-educated persons.

Bullet #2 The pamphlet also began to stir up sentiment in favor of independence within the Continental Congress. In the spring of 1776, Richard Henry Lee, a Continental Congressman from Virginia, moved that the "United Colonies are, and as a right ought to be, free and Independent States".

Bullet #3 By the summer of 1776, Congress was ready to vote for independence, but needed to develop a suitable statement to declare their intentions. To that purpose, a "Committee of Five" was appointed to investigate and draft a formal declaration of independence. The committee included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. While Adams seemed the likely choice to write the Declaration, he decided to defer to Jefferson.



# Declaration of Independence

- Both a formal statement of independence and a declaration of war
- Jefferson “borrowed” ideas from Enlightenment thinkers
- Three purposes



Bullet #1 The Declaration of Independence was not just a formal statement in which the colonies asserted the right to govern themselves; it was also a declaration of war against Great Britain.

Bullet #2 The Declaration borrowed heavily from the ideas of several Enlightenment philosophers and writers, including John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Jefferson focused in particular on the notion of a “social contract,” noting that “whenever government becomes destructive of these ends (for which it was created), it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.” Jefferson also asserted that people have “natural rights”, including, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Bullet #3 Basically, the Declaration had three specific purposes. The first was to provide a statement of human rights and a philosophical discussion about when and why people have a right to break away from one form of government and replace it with another form. It is in this part that Jefferson made his famous (and controversial) assertion that “all men are created equal.” The second was to give a list of specific complaints, or grievances, against King George, spelling out the reasons why the colonies sought separation from England. The third purpose was a formal declaration of war, to which the colonies pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their “sacred honor.”

## Land Ordinance of 1785

- Intended to provide a fair way to divide land in the Northwest Territory
- “Townships” and “sections”
- Other provisions
- High initial land costs • Speculators



Bullets #1–3 One of the most important pieces of legislation passed by the U.S. government under the Articles of Confederation was the Land Ordinance of 1785, which provided for the division and sale of the land in the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. Land was divided into six square-mile areas called “townships”, and were further divided into 36 one square-mile “sections.” One section (Section 16) was set aside for schools and school support. Other sections were set aside for revenue for the national government.

Bullet #4 While the Ordinance did spell out a equitable way for the land to be distributed, the price Congress demanded was steep for that time period—\$1 per acre, or \$640 per section. Few settlers had that kind of money, and consequently, speculators ended up buying much of the land, which they then divided into smaller parcels and sold at a hefty profit.

# Northwest Ordinance of 1787

- Allowed for the creation of new states in the Northwest Territory
- Also called for creation of territorial and state governments
- Forbade slavery
- Public education
- Fair dealings with Indians



Bullets #1–5 While the Land Ordinance allowed for the distribution and sale of the land in the Northwest Territory, the Northwest Ordinance provided for the formation of states, allowing for three to five new states to be created. Eventually, five states were carved out from the land in the territory: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The Ordinance also called for a territory to be created when population in an area reached 5000, and for the territory to be eligible for statehood when population reached 60,000. Other provisions forbade slavery, encouraged public education, and mandated fair dealings with Indians.

Many claim that the Northwest Ordinance made the nation more democratic because of its provisions calling for fair dealings with Indians as well as abolition of slavery in the new territories and states. It was extremely difficult, however, for the government to enforce these provisions.