HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS
(2001–2017)
FEATURED IN
Teaching U.S. History Thematically
Document-Based Lessons for the Secondary Classroom
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**Event:** USA PATRIOT Act, 2001

**Document:** Dispelling Some of the Major Myths About the USA PATRIOT Act, U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.

**Myth:** The ACLU claims that the Patriot Act “expands terrorism laws to include ‘domestic terrorism’ which could subject political organizations to surveillance, wiretapping, harassment, and criminal action for political advocacy.” They also claim that it includes a “provision that might allow the actions of peaceful groups that dissent from government policy, such as Greenpeace, to be treated as ‘domestic terrorism.’” . . .

**Reality:** The Patriot Act limits domestic terrorism to conduct that breaks criminal laws, endangering human life. “Peaceful groups that dissent from government policy” without breaking laws cannot be targeted. Peaceful political discourse and dissent is one of America’s most cherished freedoms, and is not subject to investigation as domestic terrorism. Under the Patriot Act, the definition of “domestic terrorism” is limited to conduct that (1) violates federal or state criminal law and (2) is dangerous to human life. Therefore, peaceful political organizations engaging in political advocacy will obviously not come under this definition. (Patriot Act, Section 802)

**Myth:** The ACLU has claimed that “Many [people] are unaware that their library habits could become the target of government surveillance. In a free society, such monitoring is odious and unnecessary. . . The secrecy that surrounds section 215 leads us to a society where the ‘thought police’ can target us for what we choose to read or what Websites we visit.” (ACLU, July 22, 2003)

**Reality:** The Patriot Act specifically protects Americans’ First Amendment rights, and terrorism investigators have no interest in the library habits of ordinary Americans. Historically, terrorists and spies have used libraries to plan and carry out activities that threaten our national security. If terrorists or spies use libraries, we should not allow them to become safe havens for their terrorist or clandestine activities. The Patriot Act ensures that business records—whether from a library or any other business—can be obtained in national security investigations with the permission of a federal judge.

Examining business records often provides the key that investigators are looking for to solve a wide range of crimes. Investigators might seek select records from hardware stores or chemical plants, for example, to find out who bought materials to make a bomb, or bank records to see who’s sending money to terrorists. Law enforcement authorities have always been able to obtain business records in criminal cases through grand jury subpoenas, and continue to do so in national security cases where appropriate. In a recent domestic terrorism case, for example, a grand jury served a subpoena on a bookseller to obtain records showing that a suspect had purchased a book giving instructions on how to build a particularly unusual detonator that had been used in several bombings. This was important evidence identifying the suspect as the bomber.

In national security cases where use of the grand jury process was not appropriate, investigators previously had limited tools at their disposal to obtain certain business records. Under the Patriot Act, the government can now ask a federal court (the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court), if needed to aid an investigation, to order production of the same type of records available through grand jury subpoenas. . . .

**Source:** The US Department of Justice. (n.d.). Dispelling some of the major myths about the USA Patriot Act. Retrieved from justice.gov/archive/ll/subs/u_myths.htm
**Event:** War on Terror begins, 2001

**Document:** The War on Terror, George W. Bush, 2001

On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. . . Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking, who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as Al Qaida. . . . The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics, a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists’ directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children. . . 

The leadership of Al Qaida has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan, we see Al Qaida’s vision for the world. Afghanistan’s people have been brutalized. Many are starving, and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough. . . .

Our war on terror begins with Al Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated. . . Americans are asking, how will we fight and win this war? We will direct every resource at our command, every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war, to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network.

Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.

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**Event:** Barack Obama elected, 2008

**Document:** A More Perfect Union, Barack Obama, 2008

“We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.” Two hundred and twenty-one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. . . .

The document [the Constitution] they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time. . . .

As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven’t fixed them, fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students. . . .

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. . . .

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. . . . Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. . . . This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected.

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**Event:** Aurora movie theater shooting, 2012

**Document:** Remarks by the President on Common-Sense Gun Safety Reform, Barack Obama, 2016

Every single year, more than 30,000 Americans have their lives cut short by guns—30,000. Suicides. Domestic violence. Gang shootouts. Accidents. . . .

I believe in the Second Amendment. . . . It guarantees a right to bear arms. . . . But I also believe that we can find ways to reduce gun violence consistent with the Second Amendment.

I mean, think about it. We all believe in the First Amendment, the guarantee of free speech, but we accept that you can’t yell “fire” in a theater. We understand there are some constraints on our freedom in order to protect innocent people. . . .

Today, background checks are required at gun stores. If a father wants to teach his daughter how to hunt, he can walk into a gun store, get a background check, purchase his weapon safely and responsibly. This is not seen as an infringement on the Second Amendment. Contrary to the claims of what some gun rights proponents have suggested, this hasn’t been the first step in some slippery slope to mass confiscation. . . . You pass a background check; you purchase a firearm.

The problem is some gun sellers have been operating under a different set of rules. A violent felon can buy the exact same weapon over the Internet with no background check, no questions asked. . . .

So we’ve created a system in which dangerous people are allowed to play by a different set of rules than a responsible gun owner who buys his or her gun the right way and subjects themselves to a background check. That doesn’t make sense. Everybody should have to abide by the same rules. Most Americans and gun owners agree. . . .

So let me outline what we’re going to be doing. Number one, anybody in the business of selling firearms must get a license and conduct background checks, or be subject to criminal prosecutions. . . .

Number two, we’re going to do everything we can to ensure the smart and effective enforcement of gun safety laws that are already on the books, which means we’re going to add 200 more ATF agents and investigators. . . .

Number three, we’re going to do more to help those suffering from mental illness get the help that they need. . . . We’re going to ensure that federal mental health records are submitted to the background check system, and remove barriers that prevent states from reporting relevant information. . . .

Number four, we’re going to boost gun safety technology. . . . If we can set it up so you can’t unlock your phone unless you’ve got the right fingerprint, why can’t we do the same thing for our guns? . . .

. . . Second Amendment rights are important, but there are other rights that we care about as well. And we have to be able to balance them. . . . Our right to peaceful assembly—that right was robbed from moviegoers in Aurora and Lafayette.

Event: 240th anniversary of the start of the Revolutionary War, 2015

Document: What Does Democracy Mean to You? various authors, 2015

1. Democracy means equality. @evdem
2. Democracy means stopping the violence. @evdem
3. Democracy means power and possibility. @evdem
4. Democracy means freedom to be me. @evdem
5. Democracy means everyone has the power to create change. @evdem
6. Democracy means to me . . . majority rules. @WhenInDoughtSigh
7. Democracy without a Constitution is mob rule. @MrTugwit
8. Democracy means being able to disagree. @JRwaratah
9. Democracy means no forced vaccinations, no state schooling, no taxes propping up banks & GE and no central banking aka “The Fed.” @GlendaMcRose
10. To me democracy means we’re in this together & we share responsibility for the outcomes of govt. @socialcap

**Event:** The NAACP sues North Carolina’s governor, 2015


These cases seek to protect the voting rights of North Carolina citizens. . . . Because voting is the fundamental building block of political power, “[o]ther rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined.” . . . Congress enacted Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) to provide added protection to the fundamental right to vote. Section 2 announces a straightforward rule: regardless of the reasons why a state chooses to change a voting practice, the change is unlawful if it “results in a denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.” . . . By the plain terms of the statute, such an abridgement occurs if a voting practice imposes electoral burdens that result in racial minorities having “less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the political process.” . . . During the waning hours of the 2013 legislative session, the General Assembly enacted House Bill 589 (“HB589”), which severely impairs access to the franchise of all North Carolinians—but especially African-American and young voters. Among other things, HB589 imposes onerous and strict voter ID requirements; eliminates same-day registration (SDR); eliminates out-of-precinct provisional voting; sharply reduces the availability of in-person early voting; eliminates the discretion previously given to localities to keep polls open for an extra hour on Election Day; expands poll observers and challengers; and eliminates the State’s civic engagement programs that allowed 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote. . . . Indeed, at the time it enacted HB 589, the General Assembly had before it (or previously had been told) that African Americans used early voting, SDR, and out-of-precinct voting at far higher rates than whites. The evidence shows, moreover, that the elimination of these practices will interact with existing socioeconomic conditions to impose material burdens on African Americans’ ability to vote. North Carolina has an unfortunate and judicially recognized history of racial discrimination, and the effects of that discrimination persist to this day: poverty rates for African Americans are far higher than poverty rates for whites; and educational attainment is significantly lower for African Americans than it is for whites. Under the statute and governing case law, these facts are enough to establish a Section 2 violation, and the Court should enjoin the challenged provisions on that statutory basis alone.

. . . The law’s disproportionate burdens on African Americans, the highly unusual and expedited manner in which HB 589 was enacted, the evidence that was before the legislature at the time, and the absence of any credible legislative rationale all show that the legislature enacted the statue (at least in part) to depress minority voter turnout, in violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Even if the legislature lacked discriminatory intent, HB 589 would nonetheless be unlawful because it imposes substantial burdens on the right to vote that are not outweighed by any substantial state purpose.

Event: Supreme Court allows same-sex marriage, 2015

Document: Obergefell v. Hodges, Supreme Court, 2015

Michigan, Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee define marriage as a union between one man and one woman. The petitioners, 14 same-sex couples and two men whose same-sex partners are deceased, filed suits in Federal District Courts in their home States, claiming that respondent state officials violate the Fourteenth Amendment by denying them the right to marry or to have marriages lawfully performed in another State given full recognition. . . .

Held: The Fourteenth Amendment requires a State to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out-of-State. . . .

(1) The history of marriage as a union between two persons of the opposite sex marks the beginning of these cases. To the respondents, it would demean a timeless institution if marriage were extended to same-sex couples. But the petitioners, far from seeking to devalue marriage, seek it for themselves because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities, as illustrated by the petitioners’ own experiences. . . .

(2) The history of marriage is one of both continuity and change. Changes, such as the decline of arranged marriages and the abandonment of the law of coverture, have worked deep transformations in the structure of marriage, affecting aspects of marriage once viewed as essential. These new insights have strengthened, not weakened, the institution. Changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations.

This dynamic can be seen in the Nation’s experience with gay and lesbian rights. Well into the 20th century, many States condemned same-sex intimacy as immoral, and homosexuality was treated as an illness. Later in the century, cultural and political developments allowed same-sex couples to lead more open and public lives. Extensive public and private dialogue followed, along with shifts in public attitudes. Questions about the legal treatment of gays and lesbians soon reached the courts, where they could be discussed in the formal discourse of the law. In 2003, this Court overruled its 1986 decision in Bowers v. Hardwick, . . . which upheld a Georgia law that criminalized certain homosexual acts, concluding laws making same-sex intimacy a crime “demea[n] the lives of homosexual persons.” . . .

(1) The fundamental liberties protected by the Fourteenth Amendment Due Process Clause extend to certain personal choices central to individual dignity and autonomy, including intimate choices defining personal identity and beliefs. . . . Courts must exercise reasoned judgment in identifying interests of the person so fundamental that the State must accord them its respect. History and tradition guide and discipline the inquiry but do not set its outer boundaries. When new insight reveals discord between the Constitution’s central protections and a received legal stricture, a claim to liberty must be addressed.
**Event:** Donald Trump elected, 2016

**Document:** Bringing Back Jobs and Growth, Donald Trump administration, 2017

Since the recession of 2008, American workers and businesses have suffered through the slowest economic recovery since World War II. The U.S. lost nearly 300,000 manufacturing jobs during this period, while the share of Americans in the workforce plummeted to lows not seen since the 1970s, the national debt doubled, and [the] middle class got smaller. To get the economy back on track, President Trump has outlined a bold plan to create 25 million new American jobs in the next decade and return to 4 percent annual economic growth.

The plan starts with pro-growth tax reform to help American workers and businesses keep more of their hard-earned dollars. The President’s plan will lower rates for Americans in every tax bracket, simplify the tax code, and reduce the U.S. corporate tax rate, which is one of the highest in the world. Fixing a tax code that is outdated, overly complex, and too onerous will unleash America’s economy, creating millions of new jobs and boosting economic growth.

As a lifelong job-creator and businessman, the President also knows how important it is to get Washington out of the way of America’s small businesses, entrepreneurs, and workers. In 2015 alone, federal regulations cost the American economy more than $2 trillion. That is why the President has proposed a moratorium on new federal regulations and is ordering the heads of federal agencies and departments to identify job-killing regulations that should be repealed.

With decades of deal-making experience, the President also understands how critical it is to negotiate the best possible trade deals for the United States. By renegotiating existing trade deals, and taking a tough stance on future ones, we will ensure that trade agreements bring good-paying jobs to our shores and support American manufacturing, the backbone of our economy. The President plans to show America’s trading partners that we mean business by ensuring consequences for countries that engage in illegal or unfair trade practices that hurt American workers.

By standing side-by-side with America’s workers and businesses, the President’s policies will unleash economic growth, create 25 million new jobs, and help Make America Great Again.

**Event:** United States bombs Syria, 2017

**Document:** Statement on Syria, Donald Trump, 2017

My fellow Americans: On Tuesday, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad launched a horrible chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians. Using a deadly nerve agent, Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women, and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many. Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror.

Tonight, I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched. It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons. There can be no dispute that Syria used banned chemical weapons, violated its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, and ignored the urging of the U.N. Security Council.

Years of previous attempts at changing Assad’s behavior have all failed, and failed very dramatically. As a result, the refugee crisis continues to deepen and the region continues to destabilize, threatening the United States and its allies.

Tonight, I call on all civilized nations to join us in seeking to end the slaughter and bloodshed in Syria, and also to end terrorism of all kinds and all types. We ask for God’s wisdom as we face the challenge of our very troubled world. We pray for the lives of the wounded and for the souls of those who have passed. And we hope that as long as America stands for justice, then peace and harmony will, in the end, prevail.

Goodnight. And God bless America and the entire world. Thank you.