
Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Segment Length: 4:13 minutes

Lesson Description:

Why did the Founding Fathers want to limit government power? What was so special about the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution? This segment looks at the principle of limited government.

Concepts & Key Terms:

Declaration of Independence – adopted by the Second Continental Congress and announced that the Thirteen Colonies, at war with Great Britain, regarded themselves as thirteen independent states, no longer under British rule.

Constitution of the United States – delineates and limits the powers of the national government and further protects people's rights through the Bill of Rights and other amendments.

Limited Government – government power restricted by law, usually in a written constitution. The United States Constitution limits the power of the federal government by delegating to it specific powers.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- discuss the purpose of the Declaration of Independence.
- discuss separation of powers and checks and balances.
- explain the reason for limits on government powers.
- evaluate the impact of separation of powers and checks and balances on limited government.

Preview Activity:

Write this question on the board: What are some complaints that Americans have today about the government?

Use Think, Pair, Share to have students answer the preview question. After a few minutes, poll the students. Ask the students to discuss their answers.

Viewing Guide:

We recommend that teachers show the video segment twice: once to allow students to view the video and focus on the issues presented, and once to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs sharing and verifying answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

1. limiting government
2. Constitution
3. being jailed
4. speak
5. celebrate

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. The Declaration isn't about safety or things government should do. It's about _____ . It's about freedom.
2. "Trust no man with too much government power, said Jefferson, "bind them with the chains of the _____."
3. Fortunately in America, thanks to the Constitution, we can say most anything we want without _____.
4. I'm glad I live in America, where I can carry pliers and _____ freely.
5. Still, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have helped keep us free. That's something to _____!

Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:

Thomas Jefferson said that we should "trust no man with too much government power" and that we should "bind them with the chains of the Constitution." Why might he have said that?

What is the difference between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? _____

Discussion and Analysis:

1. John Stossel said that the Declaration of Independence is about limiting government. Why should government be limited?
2. Why do we have a constitution? What role does it serve?
3. How does the Constitution help us? Would giving government more power make us more or less free? Does it matter?
4. The idea that we have natural rights helps us understand that our rights do not come from government but rather are protected by government. Why is this an important distinction?
5. In the video, John Stossel said that a few years after the Declaration of Independence, America was perceived as the most prosperous and the freest country in the world. What is the connection between prosperity and freedom?
6. As you saw in the video, people in England have been jailed for offensive speech and social media posts. Can that happen in the United States? Why / Why not?
7. Should people be free to speak, even if it is offensive? What might happen if offensive speech is banned?
8. John Stossel referred to various constitutional amendments. What are “amendments”? What are the first 10 amendments called? Why are they called that? What amendments do you know of?
9. When a law passed by Congress, or a regulation created by a government agency, or a presidential decision goes beyond the powers granted in the Constitution, the Supreme Court can declare it unconstitutional. Is that good or bad? Why? What is that concept called?
10. John Stossel referred to separation of powers when he said, “The Constitution divided government power in ways that limit authoritarian politicians from both parties.” How would separating powers among executive, legislative, and judicial branches limit politicians?
11. People often say that the U.S. is a democracy, but the Founders limited government power to prevent complete majority rule—often referred to as the tyranny of the majority. What does “tyranny of the majority” mean? What are some ways the majority might be tyrannical were it not for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
12. The natural rights the Founders tried to protect do not include any rights that others had to provide, that is, they were not obligations on the part of other people. How does that differ from the way some people use the word “rights” today? Should there be rights that others—via government—have to provide? If so, what rights would that be? Who would decide?
13. Have the ideas of natural rights and limited government become outdated? If so, what kind of government should we have?

Discuss These Lines from the Video:

1. The Declaration isn't about safety or things government should do. It's limiting government. It's about freedom.

2. The founders were sick of British oppression. They worried about government having too much power.
3. Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues wrote the Declaration to create a new form of government, one where people could rule themselves.
4. The fourth of July celebrates the Declaration, which led to the Constitution, the document that really lays out the rules that limit government.
5. Fortunately, in America, thanks to the Constitution, we can say most anything we want without being jailed.
6. The Constitution divided government power in ways that limit authoritarian politicians from both parties.
7. The Supreme Court stopped President Obama more than a hundred times.
8. Thomas Jefferson promised a wise and frugal government. We are already more than 21 trillion dollars in debt.
9. Jefferson wrote about leaving men “free to regulate their own pursuits.” Now we’ve got more than 180,000 pages of rules.

Quotes for Discussion:

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. – Thomas Jefferson

These are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate. – Thomas Jefferson

The strongest argument against totalitarianism may be a recognition of a universal human nature; that all humans have innate desires for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The doctrine of the blank slate... is a totalitarian's dream. – Steven Pinker

When I was growing up, I don't remember being told that America was created so that everyone could get rich. I remember being told it was about opportunity and the pursuit of happiness. Not happiness itself, but the pursuit. – Martin Scorsese

You will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make a good use of it. – John Adams

The policy of American government is to leave its citizens free, neither restraining them nor aiding them in their pursuits.” – Thomas Jefferson

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the majority discovers it can vote itself largess out of the public treasury. – Alexander Tytler

It will be of little avail to the people that the laws are made by men of their own choice, if the laws be so voluminous that they cannot be read, or so incoherent that they cannot be understood;

if they be repealed or revised before they are promulgated, or undergo such incessant changes that no man who knows what the law is today can guess what it will be tomorrow.

– James Madison

Our Bill of Rights curbs all three branches of government. It subjects all departments of government to a rule of law and sets boundaries beyond which no official may go. It emphasizes that in this country man walks with dignity and without fear, that he need not grovel before an all-powerful government.

– Justice William O. Douglas

If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose its freedom; and the irony of it is that, if it is comfort or money it values more, it will lose that too.

– William Somerset Maugham

The First Amendment was designed to protect offensive speech, because nobody ever tries to ban the other kind.

– Mike Godwin

I am thankful for all the complaining I hear about our government because it means we have freedom of speech.

– Nancie J. Carmody

We must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt.

– Thomas Jefferson

Activities:

1. Distribute copies of the accompanying Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of Independence Group Activity Worksheet and have students complete the worksheet in class.
2. Distribute copies of the Texas Seed Bill article and the accompanying questions and have students read the article and answer the questions for homework.
3. Research and write a report on natural rights, the concept propounded by John Locke in his Second Treatise of Government that all individuals are born with certain “inalienable” natural rights: life, liberty, and property.
4. Research the ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Write an essay that explains their differing views. Which ideas promote the most freedom? Whose ideas do you believe are better to live by? What can we do to ensure that those ideas are promoted by people who run for office?
5. Write an essay that explains how the U. S. Constitution limits the powers of government.
6. Research and report on U. S. Supreme Court cases that relate to issues of individual, natural rights (e.g., *Korematsu v. U.S.*, *Kelo v. City of New London*).
7. The United States government was designed with a system of checks and balances, also known as a separation of powers. The idea, propounded by Enlightenment philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, was to ensure that one branch of government would not become too powerful and that the rights of citizens would not be usurped by the will of the majority. Each branch of government was given certain limited powers.
8. Research the system of checks and balances. Report to the class on either a) the powers of each branch of government, b) how the system of checks and balances works, giving examples, or c) Supreme Court cases that have dealt with separation of powers issues.

9. Research the national debt. How much is it? How fast is it growing? What does it all mean?
10. Read the Declaration of Independence. What are the three sections in the document? Are any of the complaints about the king in 1776 valid complaints about the government today? If so, which ones? If not, why not? Explain.
11. In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote and published Common Sense. What was the purpose of the pamphlet? For whom was it written? Is it considered a success? Why / Why not?
12. Write a song or a poem about freedom in America and what it means to you.

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected, whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Declaration of Independence

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

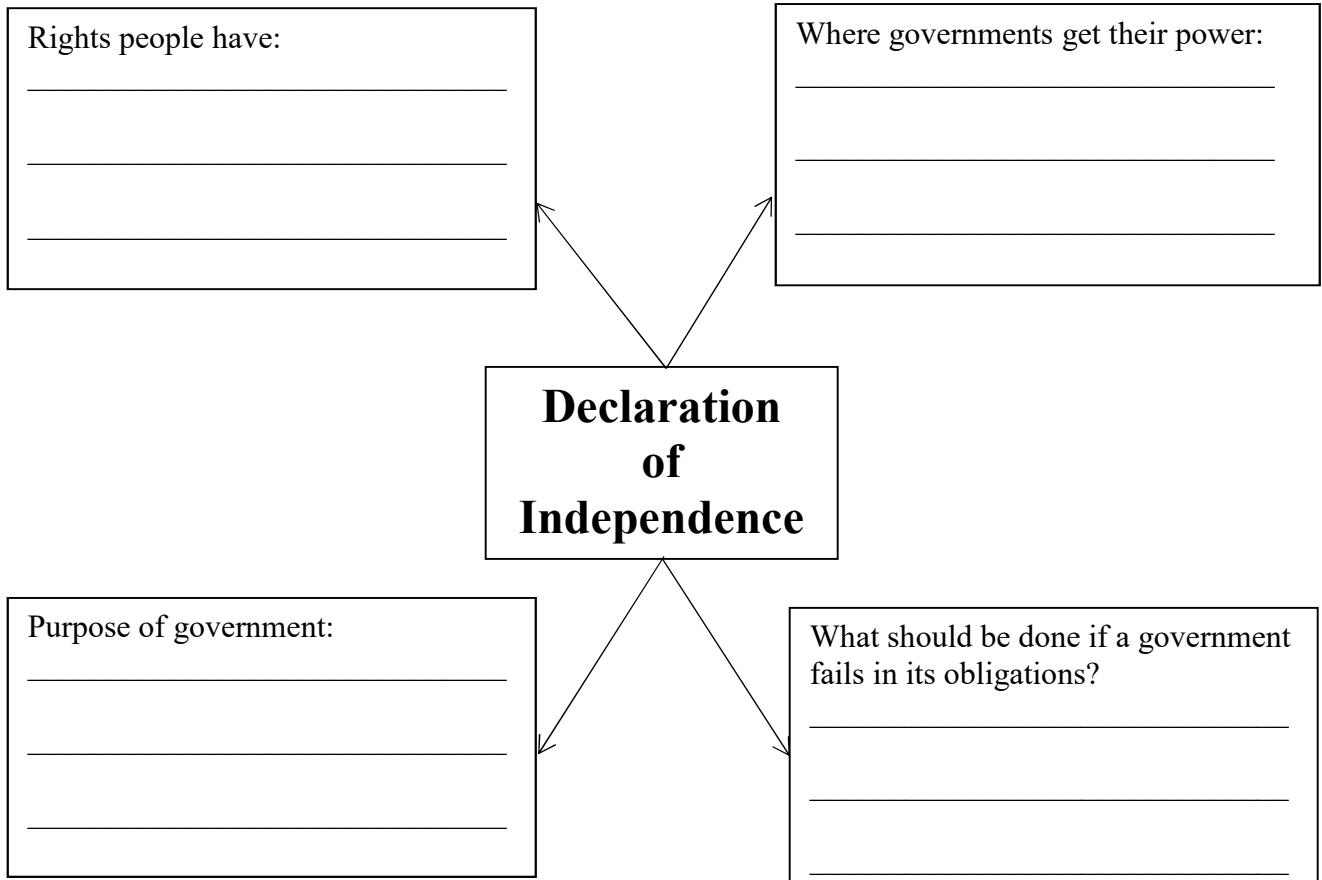
Directions: In this activity, students discuss some of the ideals in the Declaration of Independence.

Step I

1. Form small groups to discuss the meaning of the three natural rights that Jefferson identified in the Declaration of Independence: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."
2. For each one of the three rights, group members should answer this question: What does this right specifically refer to in our lives today?
3. The groups should then post their answers for the rest of the class to see.
4. Hold a general class discussion and vote, if necessary, to drop or keep the meanings that each group has developed for the three rights.

Step II

1. Using the Declaration of Independence, discuss these questions with your group members.
2. Then, fill in the boxes below.



Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

“Why Grover Cleveland Vetoed the Texas Seed Bill” by Robert Higgs

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: Read the article “Why Grover Cleveland Vetoed the Texas Seed Bill.” Use a dictionary to look up any words you don’t know. Then, re-read the article, highlighting or underlining any information you think is important to your understanding the article. Finally, answer the following questions.

1. Why did Grover Cleveland believe in limited government? _____

2. Why was Cleveland known as the “veto mayor” and “veto governor”? _____

3. Based on the article, what do you think the term “essential constitutional function” means?

4. What was the issue with the Texas Seed Bill? _____

5. Why did Cleveland veto the Texas Seed Bill? _____

6. Does it matter if elected officials follow the Constitution or is it more important to give citizens what they want? Why?

7. What is the connection between the Stossel video “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” and the Texas Seed Bill story?

**IDEAS
ON LIBERTY**

JULY/AUGUST 2003

Why Grover Cleveland Vetoed the Texas Seed Bill



Grover Cleveland was the last U.S. president with a valid claim to be known as a classical liberal. (By the time “Silent Cal” Coolidge became president, the big-government horse was already out of the barn, and Ronald Reagan as president was as much the big-government problem as he was the solution.)

A lawyer who lacked a philosophical temperament or education, Cleveland derived his devotion to limited government from his reverence for the U.S. Constitution. An honest man—an *extraordinarily* honest man for a politician—he took seriously his oath to “preserve, protect, and defend” that document.

Although nineteenth-century government now appears remarkably constricted, politicians in those days were no less predatory and corrupt than our own. Our forebears, however, kept the government within tighter bounds because so many of them harbored ideological hostility to big government, and therefore they often refused to tolerate out-of-bounds government programs, regardless of the proffered rationale. Many things were still viewed as “not the proper business of government,” an attitude that allowed at least some politicians to survive while resisting raids on the public’s purse and incursions on the people’s liberties. Cleveland was one such political survivor.

As a government officer, Cleveland demonstrated that much good could be done

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simply by resisting legislative mischief. As the mayor of Buffalo, New York, for the single year 1882, he became known as the “veto mayor” by virtue of withholding his stamp of approval from the skullduggery of corrupt aldermen. Then, after taking office as New York’s governor in January 1883, he gained a reputation as the “veto governor.”¹ During his two terms as president (1885–89 and 1893–97), he vetoed more congressional bills than any other president except Franklin D. Roosevelt (who held office more than twelve years, as against Cleveland’s eight), and only seven of his 584 vetoes were overridden by Congress.²

Cleveland believed in keeping government expenditure at the minimum required to carry out essential constitutional functions. “When a man in office lays out a dollar in extravagance,” declared Cleveland, “he acts immorally by the people.”³ He fought to lower tariffs, which the Republicans had hoisted to punishing levels, and to hold back the flood of phony pensions that congressmen were awarding in order to buy votes and to placate the Grand Army of the Republic, the most powerful political pressure group of the late nineteenth century.

It should have surprised no one, therefore, when Cleveland vetoed the Texas Seed Bill early in 1887. This legislation appropriated \$10,000—a trifling sum even in those days—to allow the Commissioner of Agriculture to purchase seed grain for distribution to farmers in certain counties of Texas that had suffered from drought.⁴ The president’s veto message read in part as follows:

I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution; and I do not believe that the power and duty of the General Government ought to be extended to the relief of individual suffering which is in no manner properly related to the public service or benefit. A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadily resisted, to the end that the lesson should be constantly enforced that, though the people support the Government, the Government should not support the people.⁵

Cleveland went on to point out that “the friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied on to relieve their fellow citizens in misfortune,” and indeed that “individual aid has to some extent already been extended to the sufferers mentioned in this bill.” Further, he suggested that if members of Congress really wanted to send seed to the suffering Texans, the congressmen might personally carry out this charitable transfer by using the seed routinely provided to all members for distribution to their constituents (at an expense of \$100,000 in that fiscal year).⁶

Unpopular Man

Cleveland’s second term as president came to a sad end, as even his own party turned against him for the most part. After striving courageously for four years to preserve free markets, limited government, and a sound currency against those who urged resort to statist nostrums during the country’s worst economic slump, Cleveland left office an extremely unpopular man.⁷ Although his reputation recovered later, especially after his death (in 1908), he has never been regarded as one of the country’s “great presidents.”

In recent years, historians have tended to pooh-pooh Cleveland as a reactionary who accomplished nothing of much significance (unlike, say, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom most historians idolize), and some have gone so far as to condemn Cleveland and his supporters as “Bourbon Democrats” in cahoots with greedy businessmen and bankers.

A more just verdict was reached, however, by historian Richard Welch, who wrote of the Cleveland Democrats: “They were convinced of the superiority of free enterprise to any other economic system; they defined ‘reform’ in terms of improvements in public morality and administrative efficiency; they advocated ‘sound money’ and the preservation of the gold standard—but these convictions were shared by a majority of middle-class Americans. It is false to the historical context of Gilded Age America to see such concerns as indicative of collusion with big business.”⁸

Perhaps the highest praise came from H. L. Mencken, who wrote of Cleveland: “It is not likely that we shall see his like again, at least in the present age. The Presidency is now closed to the kind of character that he had so abundantly.”⁹ □

1. Matthew Hoffman, “Odyssey of a Statesman,” *The Free Market*, January 1991, p. 6.

2. For figures on presidential vetoes, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 1082; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 246.

3. Quoted in Hoffman, p. 6.

4. Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1932), p. 331.

5. *Congressional Record*, 49 Cong., 2d Sess., vol. XVIII, Pt. II, 1887, p. 1875.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 77–105.

8. Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 220.

9. H. L. Mencken, “A Good Man in a Bad Trade” [1933], in H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 229.