

## *The Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the Historians*

### **Goals:**

- Introduce students to the role historiography plays in our understanding of the Civil War.
- Sharpen their understanding of the underlying causes of the war.
- Develop an appreciation of the long term consequences of these theories, as well as their impact on contemporary society.

### **Objectives:**

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Define historiography and discuss its importance to the study of the Civil War.
- Identify the underlying causes of the war, both proximate and long-term.
- Compare these theories in light contemporary scholarship.
- Analyze whether Lincoln's reference to the Declaration of Independence in his Gettysburg Address constituted a re-founding of the American political tradition dating back to the Founding era or, as others have suggested, a derailment of America's true tradition.

### **Materials:**

#### Primary Sources:

- \* *Declaration of Independence*
- \* *Gettysburg Address*.

#### Secondary Sources:

- \* Harry V. Jaffa's *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*  
Chapter 2: *The Declaration of Independence of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the Historians*.
- \* Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*  
Chapter V: *The Declaration of Independence: A Derailment?*

### **Lesson Procedure:**

The instructor should attempt to lead a discussion of the assigned readings, focusing in a particular way on the four epigraphs below, taken from Letter to Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler.

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.

—Abraham Lincoln

To ask whether the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence is true or false is essentially a meaningless question.

—Carl Becker

Since the Civil War, in which the Southern States were conquered, against all historical logic and sound sense, the American people have been in a condition of political and popular decay. . . . The beginnings of a great new social order based on the principle of slavery and inequality were destroyed by that war, and with them also the embryo of a future truly great America.

—Adolf Hitler

“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.” The nation dedicated to this proposition has now become, no doubt partly as a consequence of this dedication, the most powerful and prosperous of the nations of the earth. Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those “truths to be self-evident”?

—Leo Strauss