Rather than a reality set in stone, the United States has always been a project in formation. The People Speak presents a view of American history in motion, telling the stories of ordinary people who have defined democracy through their powerful words and actions. This exciting film traces the stories and experiences of everyday Americans through their own words, emphasizing the idea that democracy is not a spectator sport but a reflection of the efforts of citizens who have pushed the nation to live up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. This special features dramatic interpretations of documents, letters, diaries and other primary sources from U.S. history read by Matt Damon, Benjamin Bratt, Maria Tomei, Don Cheadle and others. Musical performances by Bruce Springsteen, John Legend, and others also introduce viewers to our nation’s iconic protest songs.

Every year on September 17th, Constitution Day, Americans reflect on the meaning of the founding documents and the rights they affirm. The People Speak offers moving examples of how people throughout U.S. history have fought to see these ideals come to life for all people. Slave narratives, testimonies of striking workers, and civil rights protesters are among the moving and poignant proclamations included in this 90-minute film. Based on the books A People’s History of the United States by Howard Zinn and Voices of a People’s History of the United States by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, these performances give students an active and fresh perspective on the people and events that have changed the course of our nation’s history. By watching and listening to these performers, students will gain new insights into critical turning points in American history, and the ways average citizens have agitated for transformation. These gripping, shocking, and triumphant stories can inspire students to learn more about the past and to remind them that participation in civic culture is as American as apple pie.

Curriculum links
The People Speak would be an excellent fit with American History, American Studies, Race & Ethnic Relations, Popular Culture, and Ethics courses. It would be a great film to show during Constitution Day events and activities. It is appropriate for high school and college students. Educators may want to stream clips from this program to their classes and pair them with the written versions of the performances. Many of these performances will be available online at www.History.com/peoplespeak.

Vocabulary
Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.History.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:
abolitionism civil disobedience impiety resistance agitation free speech opprobrium self-evident chattel habeas corpus posterity

Discussion questions
1. What was the major message of the Declaration of Independence? How is that document compared with the Constitution in this film? Do you agree with this comparison? Discuss.
2. Why was the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution? How did this come about? What do you think are the most important rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights?
3. What are some of the ways slaves resisted their status as “property”? What were some of the risks of their actions?
4. This film discusses the harsh treatment of Native Americans throughout U.S. history. What were some of the ways Native Americans attempted to maintain their freedom?
5. Many of the struggles of people of color and women to achieve full citizenship rights in American society are documented in this film. What are some of the stories that stood out to you, and why?
6. One of the key themes in this film is the roles workers have played in fighting for better labor conditions. What are some examples in this program of the ways ordinary people pushed for change in the workplace? Do you think these methods were effective? Discuss.
7. The Great Depression was a very difficult time in U.S. history, but it also inspired many people to work toward change. What is an example of a voice from the Depression era included in this film?
8. This film details the many ways Americans have defined patriotism. Among the stories in this program, which one do you think most exemplifies the spirit of patriotism, and why?
9. The civil rights movement was a watershed era in U.S. history as many Americans took up the cause to guarantee freedom and equality for all people. What are some examples from this film, or from your own studies, of efforts for change during this era?
10. If you could add one document, song, or poem to be included in The People Speak, what would it be, and why?

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hat, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence, your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Discussion questions

1. Who was Frederick Douglass? What role did he play in the anti-slavery movement?
2. What do the words impudence, bombast, and impiety mean in the context of this document?
3. This document was written in 1852. Do you think Douglass felt differently about the 4th of July after slaves were freed? Discuss.

Extended activities

1. This program features performances from key moments and turning points in U.S. history. Ask students to pick one of the readings or songs from this program and locate the words or lyrics online or at the library. Then, ask students to practice reading or performing the document or song. Have students perform these pieces to the larger class or group. Students may also want to organize performances of these pieces for the school or community.

2. Protest songs have played a crucial role in social movements throughout U.S. history. Ask students to break up into groups of three or four. Then, ask them to research a social movement or era of change in U.S. history and identify the role music played in these events (examples: anti-slavery songs, Depression-era labor songs, civil rights movement hymns, etc.). Ask students to create a visual or written presentation which incorporates the lyrics of a protest song, and write a short essay of 1-2 pages which describes the song and the context in which it was written. Music or performance students can also choose to perform these pieces in front of the class or community.

3. This film emphasizes the roles ordinary Americans have played in making change throughout American history. In small groups, ask students to design posters inspired by one of the events or eras covered in this film. These posters can be designed in PowerPoint format, on posterboard, or other formats. Students can include a motto or phrase which captures the sentiments or efforts of the person or group on which they have chosen to focus.

Websites & books

**BOOKS**

**WEBSITES**
- HISTORY™ site on The People Speak: www.History.com/thepeoplespeak
- The official site of Voices of a People’s History organization: www.peopleshistory.us
- Milestone documents from the National Archives: www.ourdocuments.gov
- The American Memory Project from the Library of Congress: memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

What is National History Day?
National History Day is an innovative curricular framework in which students learn history by selecting topics of interest and launching into a year-long research project. The culmination of the project is a contest held in the late Spring, first on the school and district or regional levels, then on the state level, and finally on the national level.

Each year National History Day uses a theme to provide a lens through which students can examine history. The theme for the 2009-2010 school year is *Innovation in History: Impact and Change*. The theme is intentionally broad enough that students can select topics from any place (local, national, or world history) and any time period. Once students choose their topics, they investigate historical context, historical significance, and the topic’s relationship to the theme by conducting research in libraries, archives and museums, through oral history interviews, and by visiting historic sites.

Why Should You and Your Students Participate?
NHD is an opportunity for teachers and students to “do” real historical research. For students, NHD allows control of their learning; they select topics from the broad theme that meet their particular interests. While program expectations and guidelines are provided for students, the research journey is created by the process and is unique to the historical research.

Throughout the year students gain essential life skills by fostering academic achievement and intellectual curiosity. In addition, students develop critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that will help them manage and use information now and in the future.

 Prepare the Next Generation of Informed Students. Implement National History Day in Your Classroom This Year!