

## THE PURPOSES OF GOVERNMENT

### The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech

#### INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution is important because it sets out the purposes or functions of government as envisioned by the framers. This lesson opens with a group activity in which students look at the words in **the Preamble** and translate them into everyday language. Then students take part in a **civil conversation** on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "**I Have a Dream**" speech. Through discussion of the speech, students will delve more deeply into the meaning of the Preamble, focusing particularly on who "We the People" are and what should be done by government and by citizens in order to make a "more perfect union" a reality.

#### OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the purposes of government as identified in the Preamble to the Constitution.
- Read a document that raises questions about the meaning of the Preamble in practice.
- Take part in a civil conversation on that document.

#### MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

Copies of the "Preamble," "Civil Conversation Guide," and "*I Have a Dream (Excerpts)*" handouts for all students. You may also want to make an overhead of the Preamble.

#### PROCEDURE

##### *Part I: Putting the Preamble into Everyday Words*

1. Distribute copies of the "**Preamble**" (and project it if you have made an overhead). Tell students that the Preamble, or introduction, to the U.S. Constitution is a very important document. It begins with an important phrase, "We the People of the United States." Ask: Why are these words important? (*Because they tell us that the government's power comes from the people.*)
2. Explain that the Preamble is also important because it outlines several purposes or functions of government. Clarify vocabulary with students or organize the students into six groups and assign each group to look up words in one phrase and come up with a "translation" of the phrase into everyday language.

## ***Part II: Civil Conversation on the “I Have a Dream” Speech***

1. Tell students that the Preamble sets goals for the government of the United States, but those goals have not always been achieved for all of the people of the United States. Sometimes groups have felt that they were not included in “We the People.” Groups and individuals have pointed out that the nation has fallen short of being a “more perfect union.” In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., other civil rights leaders, and many ordinary citizens called for the government to take action to fully include African Americans in “We the People” and extend the benefits of citizenship to African-Americans equally.
2. Tell students that in 1963, Dr. King gave a famous speech, now known as the *I Have a Dream* speech. Among other things, the speech challenged the idea that those purposes were being met in reality. Distribute the “**Civil Conversation Guide**” and “**Civil Conversation Reading: Excerpts from *I Have a Dream***” handouts and allow time for students to read the speech and complete the first five questions of the “**Civil Conversation Reading Guide**.” Remind students to keep in mind the purposes of government laid out in the Preamble as they consider the reading. This preparation could be done as homework.
3. Have the students move their chairs into a circle and review the “**Rules for Civil Conversation**” with the class. Begin the conversation by “whipping around” the class, asking every member of the group to respond briefly to questions 3 and 4 of the Reading Guide. Members should not just repeat what others say. Next, ask the group to respond to question 5 and jot down the issues raised as they answer. Continue the conversation by discussing the questions raised.
4. Debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation. Begin by asking students to return to the Reading Guide and answer questions 6 and 7. Then ask:
  - What did you learn from the civil conversation? Did the conversation help you understand the meaning and importance of the Preamble in a new way?
  - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Ask students who were not active in the conversation to comment on the things they learned or observed. Conclude the debriefing by asking all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.

## **EXTENSION**

Create a bulletin board display with the phrases from the Preamble serving as headings for columns. Ask students to look for items in the newspaper that describe activities of the federal government. Students can clip the articles and tack them on the board under the appropriate category.

Watch the speech on videotape. Have students evaluate the voice and body language techniques Dr. King uses to effectively deliver the speech.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student Handout

## **Preamble to the Constitution of the United States**

The Preamble is the introduction to the U.S. Constitution. It says:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The above phrases from the Preamble describe purposes or functions of government. Translate each phrase below into everyday language:

*To form a more perfect Union* means:

*Establish Justice* means:

*Insure domestic Tranquility* means:

*Provide for the common defence* means:

*Promote the general Welfare* means:

*Secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our Posterity* means:

## Civil Conversation Guide

### Rules for Civil Conversations

1. Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
2. Everyone in the group should participate in the conversation.
3. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
4. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
5. Be respectful of what others are saying.
6. Refer to the text to support your ideas.
7. Focus on ideas, not personalities.

### Civil Conversation Reading Guide

Reading: \_\_\_\_\_

Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section. Pay attention to your first impression as to what the reading is about. Look for the main points; then go back and re-read the selection. Briefly answer the following.

1. This selection is about \_\_\_\_\_
2. The main points are:
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
3. In the reading, I agree with \_\_\_\_\_
4. In the reading, I disagree with \_\_\_\_\_
5. What are two questions about this reading that you think need to be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answers, ones that can use materials in the text as evidence.)
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_

*The next two questions should be answered after you hold your civil conversation.*

6. What did you learn from the civil conversation?
7. What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

## I Have a Dream (Excerpts)

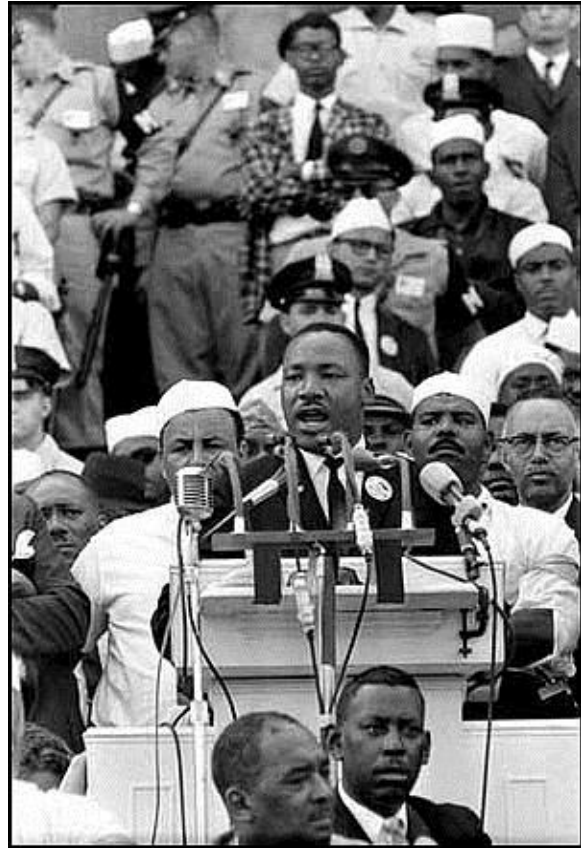
On August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to over 200,000 people attending his March on Washington. The demonstrators—black and white, poor and rich—had come to the nation's capital to demand voting rights and equal opportunity for African Americans, and to appeal for an end to racial segregation and discrimination. With the statue of Abraham Lincoln behind him, King described how the "Negro is still not free." He told of the struggle ahead, the importance of nonviolence, and his dream of the future.

Below are excerpts from the speech. As you read them, think about the purposes of government described in the Preamble. According to Dr. King, were those purposes being achieved for African Americans? Were African Americans part of "We the People"?

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I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves, who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. ...



I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day, *down* in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification;

one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. And this will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!" And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

And so let freedom ring – from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring – from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring – from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring – from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring – from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that.

Let freedom ring – from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring – from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring – from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual,

"Free at last, free at last.

Thank *God* Almighty, we are free at last."

*Sources:* Introduction adapted from HistoryChannel.com. Picture and speech from AmericanRhetoric.com