

# yes! magazine

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## *Building a Just and Sustainable World*

### DISCUSSION GUIDE | ISSUE 41 | IS THE U.S. READY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and caring the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

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By Catherine Bailey and Sarah Kuck

The United States has been proud of its leadership in human rights. Many times throughout history, we have amended our constitution to answer demands for increased tolerance and equal treatment of all citizens. Yet now we find uncharged captives held indefinitely in Guantánamo Bay, reports of torture in Abu Ghraib, limits on prisoners' access to habeas corpus, and other violations.

In order for any great nation to progress, it must reflect upon itself, celebrating its accomplishments, addressing areas of concern, and working towards improvement. One of the key goals of this issue of YES! is to present such a "look in the mirror" for the United States.

This discussion guide will focus on the following articles:

1. Eric Foner, "Sometimes a Great Nation"
2. Justin Akers Chacon, "Check Your Rights at the Border"
3. Carol Estes, "Who's Afraid of Economic Human Rights?"
4. Jesse Wegman, "Mere Justice"
5. Larry Cox & Dorothy Thomas, "Yes. We're Ready."
6. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with footnotes by the YES! editorial team

#### **Sometimes a Great Nation**

The United States has sometimes been the world leader in human rights. Yet as Thomas Jefferson warns, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance." Has our record of courage and decency led us to assume that we are still the gold standard of human rights enforcement? Foner urges us to examine our true history—one made up of both justice and injustice, of honor and cowardice. Can

we reclaim our right to call ourselves a truly great nation in terms of human rights? Foner says yes.

- In your opinion, what are some of the U.S.'s greatest achievements in human rights? What are some of the times the U.S. has fallen short of its ideals?
- Consider a time when someone discriminated against you based on your gender or the color of your skin, or something more abstract, like your faith or level of education. Discuss this experience. Were you treated with less dignity than you deserve? How did it make you feel?
- Throughout history, various groups have been denied equal opportunities for reasons that seem justified at the time. In examining past differences that were once intolerable, but are now accepted, perhaps we can learn something. Do you see any commonalities among groups of the past and present that have been excluded and oppressed?
- Sometimes, we are a great nation. With concentrated effort, we can reclaim a national identity associated with upholding human rights. What steps can you as an individual take to advance this change?

### **Check Your Rights at the Border**

U.S. trade policy is one of the factors contributing to the immigration of people from Mexico and Central America seeking work in the United States. Free trade agreements have lowered tariffs and undermined traditional economies. Chacon says that human rights are among the many things immigrants leave behind while making the journey north.

- Part of eliminating stereotypes is identifying and addressing them. What words or images come to mind when you think of the word “immigrant?” Where did these associations come from?
- Consider your own heritage. If your ancestors immigrated to the United States, what stories have they passed down in your family? Did they experience economic, cultural, social, or other kinds of discrimination?
- What role do immigrants play in our country? What are the advantages and disadvantages of easing the limitations on international migration? What effect would that have in your own life, neighborhood, and job?
- What distinguishes “beneficial” immigration from “harmful” immigration?

### **Who's Afraid of Economic Human Rights?**

Evidently, the U.S. government is. Even though 155 of

the world's nations have ratified the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which recognizes economic rights for all, the United States has not. Carol Estes argues that people who live in the richest country in the world should be entitled to housing, food, and medical care.

- “If you're homeless, you must have done something wrong to end up there, and you alone are responsible for getting yourself out of that situation.” Have you seen or heard messages like this? If so, where have they come from? Do you agree or disagree with them?
- The UDHR recognizes that every human being has economic rights. Do you think that in the United States we treat basic economic security as a right, or something to be earned?
- Does having a population of permanently poor people serve to sustain, or even benefit, an economic system?
- How would your life be different if our government provided the basic economic security outlined in the UDHR to all its citizens? What might you lose? What might you gain?

### **Mere Justice**

In his article, Wegman discusses the obstacles faced by prisoners who seek review of their cases using habeas corpus. He explains the origin of AEDPA, the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which dramatically hinders access to this right. The Act speeds up the process by which death-row inmates are pushed to executions, and simultaneously restricts all other prisoners' ability to appeal for justice.

- Do you think prisoners have too much access to court review of their cases, or too little?
- Wegman mentions that many politicians crack down on prisoners' rights because they are afraid of being perceived as “soft” or “sympathetic” towards criminals. How do you feel about this? What does this tell us about our society?

### **Yes. We're Ready.**

Larry Cox, the executive director of Amnesty International, and Dorothy Q. Thomas, senior program advisor to the U.S. Human Rights Fund, say that human rights are a powerful unifying force for activists, and many groups are drawing on human rights theory to make change.

- Think of a cause about which you feel strongly. Does



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this cause share values with those promoting human rights? Could you imagine forming a meaningful connection with someone working towards a cause different from your own, based on human rights?

- How might you expand the human rights network within your own community?

### The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In 1948, the UDHR was birthed into the world through the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt and the newly formed United Nations. The document was the first of its kind. Its 30 articles define the basic rights we all own, simply by virtue of being human. The UDHR has been translated into hundreds of languages, yet its contents are unfamiliar to many.

Examine your rights. Then consider the YES! footnotes on pages 20 and 21, showing a U.S. position on each article.

- Had you seen the UDHR before? Do any of the 30 articles surprise you? If so, which ones, and why?
- The YES! team debated long and hard over whether to include the footnotes about the U.S.'s position on each article. How did you feel about these interjections? Did they make the document more meaningful, or take away from its inherent beauty?
- How do you feel about this document? Is it just a case of one group imposing norms on others, or are there such things as "universal human rights"? If such rights exist, does this document capture them? What rights do you feel are missing from the document, if any?

*How are you using this discussion guide? How could we improve it?*

*Please share your stories and suggestions with us at [editors@yesmagazine.org](mailto:editors@yesmagazine.org), with "Discussion Guide" as the subject.*

*YES! is published by the Positive Futures Network, an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to support people's active engagement in creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.*

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