Lesson plan: What does the 4th of July mean?

Warm-up: Brainstorm

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<th>What does the 4th of July mean to me?</th>
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Activity

Excerpt: Justin Pearson’s speech on the Tennessee House floor

“Dr. King taught us that sometimes there’s a consciousness above rule, above what you might say is law – and that the true forms of protest is nonviolent disobedience. For less than a few minutes, we and you are seeking to expel District 86’s representation from this House in a country that was built on a protest – in a country that was built on a protest!

You who celebrate July 4, 1776, pop fireworks and eat hot dogs. You say, “To protest is wrong because you spoke out of turn, because you’ve spoken up for people who are marginalized, you spoke up for children who won’t ever be able to speak again, you spoke up for parents who don’t want to live in fear.”

— Justin Pearson, April 6, 2023

Discussion questions:

1. What is the main idea of Pearson’s message to the Tennessee representatives who are determining if they should expel him?

2. What does he mean when he says “in a country that was built on protest”?

3. How does Pearson use the significance of the 4th of July in his speech? How does he use this national holiday to reveal the hypocrisy of the decision to potentially expel him from his position because he was protesting?
Excerpt: Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”

“What, 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 shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, 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.

— Frederick Douglass, 1852

Discussion questions:
1. What is the main message in this part of his speech?

2. How does Douglass use the significance of the Fourth of July in his speech to make his larger point about the hypocrisy of slavery in America?

Compare and contrast:
1. In what ways are their speeches similar? In what ways are they different? How can you account for their similarities and differences?

2. What larger meaning can we gain about the significance of the Fourth of July from evaluating these two speeches? In what ways has it evolved?

3. How do Americans regard protests in US History, such as the Fourth of July? How do you see people refer to protests when they happen on the news today? In what ways are historical and contemporary protests treated similarly or differently?