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**Bio:** I am a senior pursuing a degree in Professional Writing. My hometown is Millstadt, IL

**Essay Focus:** To see the unalienable rights laid out in the Declaration realized in our country, we need to stop focusing on the number of times we as a nation have failed and look to see what steps we can take toward them.

**Word Count:** 741

**Non-profit:** The Kitchen, Inc.

When we are young, we are swept along in a patriotic fervor that is almost religious. In my first few years of schooling, American pride seemed to be the underlying theme of my education. Days were peppered with saying the pledge, learning about American heroes like Betsy Ross, George Washington, and Honest Abe, and creating third-grade poster projects on the bald eagle and the Oregon Trail. I am unsure if it was because 9/11 was, at the time, a raw and still-bleeding wound, sweeping the country into a new wave of American pride, or if the early schooling system has always pushed heavy-handed patriotism, but I, at least, grew up convinced of the undeniable fact that I lived in the greatest country in the world. I remember the almost burning sense of pride I felt when I looked at the bright reds and blues of the flag or heard the National Anthem. We were a country built on principles, on truth, fought for by soldiers and safeguarded by God.

Many people I know, friends and peers, started the same. Then, as the innocence of grade school faded into the jaded outlook of junior high and high school, doubt crept in. The rose-colored glasses begin to slip and ugly truths oozed from the cracks in the patriotic veneer, corroding our early idealistic view. Betsy Ross never invented the American Flag, George Washington owned slaves, Abraham Lincoln once considered deporting African Americans, and we as a nation have repeatedly committed atrocities as bad as those of people we have always claimed to stand against. We realize the phrase penned by Thomas Jefferson— “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.”—has historically been weighed down by so many asterisks and qualifications that what was once both a hope and a promise becomes a hypocritical mockery of itself. As the wars in the Middle East dragged on and history

lessons became less about Sacajawea and Paul Revere and more about Japanese internment camps, Native American massacres, and corrupt deals with brutal dictators, clinging to any scraps of national pride or daring to have faith in the vestiges of our founding principles seems naïve. Recently, with growing political, racial, and moral divides and the increasing disenchantment with our system, many of us have cast off our early patriotic spirit, proud and insistent that we see the truth and refuse to be blind followers of a corrupt system. Love for our country feels foolish and belief in our founding principles seems hopelessly idealistic and naïve. We sneer at our history and our past mistakes, proud that we no longer believe in all of that.

We are making a mistake. It is healthy, of course, to look at our nation with our eyes wide open, to refuse to forget or repeat the atrocities of the past and unevenness of our history. Nothing is solved by closing our eyes and hoping for the best; flaws can only be fixed if they are noticed and accepted as such. But, if in rejecting our flaws we reject our responsibility for them, we lose our chance to change things and to meet our childhood expectations for our nation. Stepping back and scoffing at a system we see as broken is not the “enlightened” thing to do. It does not absolve us of past or present mistakes or steer us to a better future. We need to love our country to be able to fix it. Embrace our roots, and instead of sneering at how often we’ve missed hitting our ideals, work to accomplish them. Instead of focusing on how much of what we believed as children to be a lie, we need to see what changes, what compromises we can take to make it true. Loving something hurts, and loving a nation, not in a blind show of patriot devotion but in full knowledge of its very real flaws, will always hurt. But, only by acknowledging and accepting those flaws can change happen, and only by truly caring for this nation and everyone who is a part of it can we look

to fulfill the dreams laid out by our Founding Fathers and have a country where everyone truly has a right to and a chance at “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”