



## **OPERATION PROTECT AND DEFEND STORY OF AMERICA ESSAY CONTEST**

**APPLICATION FORM** (Must be completed and turned in with essay – please print clearly):

Entry # \_\_\_\_\_ (leave blank) Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Guardian Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

### **STUDENT'S DECLARATION:**

*I declare that this essay is my original work, that I have not used or relied on, in whole or in part, AI or an artificial intelligence software program or website, and that it was written for my social science/government/economics class. I declare that have read and understood the requirements for submitting this essay for the Story of America essay contest. If I am chosen for an award, I give permission for my essay, and any photos taken of me at or for the awards event, to be reprinted and/or redistributed and used for educational and promotional purposes related to Operation Protect & Defend.*

Student's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's/Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*I certify that my student completed this essay under my supervision.*

Teacher's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Course Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Title of Essay: \_\_\_\_\_

**Entries must be turned into and uploaded to the Operation Protect and Defend Google Classroom no later than Friday, March 13, 2026. The Classroom Code is: fbqajtrh. Email [opdlawday@gmail.com](mailto:opdlawday@gmail.com) with questions.**

## **Story of America Essay Contest**

The goal of **Operation Protect & Defend**'s *Story of America* Essay Contest is to encourage critical thinking, active discussion and thoughtful writing about what it means to be a "good citizen" in America today. Americans enjoy a broad range of Constitutional rights that persons living in many other countries do not. These rights include freedom of speech and religion, a right to a fair trial, a right to due process and equal protection, to name a few. Along with these rights, we believe, come certain responsibilities, including the responsibility of each new generation of Americans to maintain and protect those rights in light of the circumstances and challenges facing their lives, their communities and their nation.

Teachers working with Operation Protect & Defend have developed a curriculum related to the due process rights owed to defendants during criminal trials. These rights include the right to the government proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, the right not to testify against yourself, and the right to an impartial jury represented by a cross section of the community. This course of study includes selected readings provided by your teacher and court opinions. It also involves in-class discussion and in-class writing about questions raised by the readings.

All 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in classes participating in the Operation Protect and Defend program are invited to enter this essay contest. Students will compete for the following cash awards:

Justice Robert K. Puglia Most Original & Inspirational Essay Awards	\$1,500 each
Frank C. Damrell, Lawyers' Choice Awards	\$1,000 each
Jean McEvoy Memorial Scholarship Award	\$1,000 each
Bion M. Gregory Essay Recognition Awards	\$250 each
Teacher's Choice Awards	\$200 each

It is expected that the essays submitted for the competition will be based on the student's own research and understanding and will be their own original work. It is not permissible for someone else to rewrite, change, or add text to a student's essay. However, it is permissible for someone to note spelling, word usage, grammatical, punctuation, and formatting errors. Using the work of someone else – in whole or in part – is considered plagiarism and is not permitted. Students should be careful to identify and give credit to any portion of the submitted essay that comes from another source.

***Notification of Winners and Award Dinner:*** Winners will be notified by the end of April 2026. An awards ceremony will be held on May 6, 2026, with details distributed later so please stay tuned.

## **STORY OF AMERICA 2026 ESSAY PROMPT**



One of the cornerstones of the American justice system is the right to a jury trial for those accused of committing a crime. For these trials, California's citizens are called to jury duty and are tasked to serve their community as jurors in a fair, honorable and impartial manner. Although many people have seen parts of a criminal trial on television, there are a lot of misunderstandings about the actual constitutional underpinnings of our jury trial system. Based upon what you have learned through the Dialogue on America curriculum and your classroom discussions, please answer the following question:

If you were in charge of selecting a jury that involved parties (the alleged victim and the charged defendant) of different races and different experiences, how would you ensure that the trial and jury selection were fair and free of bias and discrimination?

## **Story of America Essay Contest: Rules and Instructions**

1. The Story of America Essay Contest is open to all eligible 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in participating social science/government/economics/legal classes within the Sacramento City Unified School District, Twin Rivers Unified School District, San Juan Unified School District, Natomas Unified School District, Elk Grove Unified School District, Folsom Cordova Unified School District and the Sacramento County Office of Education. Relatives of Operation Protect & Defend steering committee members are ineligible.
2. The essay must be based on the reading materials, in-class discussions and in-class writings relating to the topic. The essay must be your original work.
3. Provide ONE copy of your essay. It must be **double-spaced** using one side of 8-1/2 x 11" paper. Number the pages consecutively (1, 2, 3 . . .).
4. The maximum number of words permitted is 2000. If typed, the type font must be 12 point or larger in a legible font (such as *Times New Roman*).
5. The completed Application Form must accompany the essay. **Your name must NOT appear on the essay itself, only on the application form.**
6. You must do your own work, during class as assigned and under the supervision of a teacher participating in the project. Your teacher must receive a copy of your essay and sign your application form. **Your essay must be turned into and uploaded to the Operation Protect and Defend Google Classroom (code: fbqajtrh) by March 13, 2026**, to ensure that you are entered in the Contest.
7. The *Story of America* program sponsors reserve the right to reprint entries. Essays will not be returned. If you want a copy of your essay for your own records, you must make a copy before submitting it.

***Story of America Essay Contest***  
**Judging Criteria:**

*A distinguished group of local judges, lawyers, and community leaders will judge the essays. Judging guidelines include:*

**UNDERSTANDING** (Maximum points 10)

10	Demonstrates a meaningful understanding of all key issues
8	Demonstrates a meaningful understanding of some key issues
6	Demonstrates a meaningful understanding of a key issue
4	Demonstrates a basic understanding of some issues
2	Demonstrates a limited understanding of the issues

**PERSPECTIVE/ORIGINALITY** (Maximum points 15)

15	Expresses original ideas and extraordinary sense of personal commitment that inspires reader
12	Expresses some original ideas and a strong sense of personal commitment that is compelling
9	Expresses personal feelings on the subject that are compelling
6	Expresses a strong statement on the subject
1	Expresses limited personal interest in the subject with few original thoughts

**WRITING** (Maximum points 5)

5	Demonstrates exceptional command of the language, including clear organization of ideas, grammatical accuracy, and a precise word choice
4	Demonstrates strong command of the language, generally free from errors in grammar and language usage
3	Demonstrates reasonable control of language, with some minor errors in grammar and structure
1	Demonstrates limited writing skills, with errors in word choice and grammar