



Why America is Great:

Our Rich Heritage

Volume I

What Principles?

Is it not the glory of the people of America, that whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience? To this manly spirit, posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theatre, in favor of private rights and public happiness.¹

James Madison, Federalist No. 14

A great movement is taking place among the people of America. Ordinary citizens—many of whom have never been involved in politics—are rising up, getting involved in their local governments, taking a stand in their communities, joining hands with their likeminded neighbors to defend what they believe are their rights as Americans. We hear over and over again the call for America to “return to her Founding principles.” What?

What are these “Founding principles”? We somehow instinctively know these principles must include the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Many also believe that these principles either include or infer limited government, free enterprise, freedom of religion, and many other things. But what do these principles look like? More to the point, what do they look like in *our* day—in the 21st century? And how do we know these principles are still relevant in our age—removed, as we are, from the Founding generation by nearly 250 years? If we are going to cry for a return to “Founding principles,” we need to ask ourselves two questions:

1. What are the “Founding principles”?
2. *Why* do we want to renew them?

Americans have enjoyed—sometimes without realizing it—the great legacy of Western Civilization. The understanding and practice of human dignity and freedom were developed, refined, and passed down to us over several centuries, from the first societies in the Middle East, to the Ancient Greeks and Romans, to the American Founders, and down to the present day. In many ways, the nation of America is the culminating expression of Western thought. The “idea” that was—and is—America has provided millions of people a level of freedom and prosperity unprecedented in human history. Today, we seem to know instinctively that we want to preserve and emulate these “principles” of Western Civilization that were passed down to us via our Founding Fathers. But why? What do we see in our Founders and in their principles that is so worthy of emulation? Do we really cherish these principles, or do we simply not want to lose the prosperity we have so long enjoyed? To find out, let’s take a brief look at some of the high points of our heritage.

Transcendent Principles (They Didn’t Come Out of Thin Air)

First, it is important to understand that the American Revolution was not a “revolution” as we understand the term in our day. The Founding Fathers were not radicals seeking to overthrow an establishment—they would have been the first to deny such a claim. Instead, they strove to preserve age-old customs and defend liberties that they felt to be theirs by right and inheritance. They didn’t draw their principles out of thin air—rather, they sought to affirm and even institutionalize precepts already deeply rooted within the culture. Alexis de Tocqueville, a young Frenchman who visited and studied America in the early 19th century, picked up on this non-revolutionary aspect of the American



Revolution. “The revolution in the United States was produced by a mature and reflective taste for freedom,” he wrote, “and not by a vague and indefinite instinct of independence. It was not supported by passions of disorder; but, on the contrary, it advanced with a love of order and of legality.”²

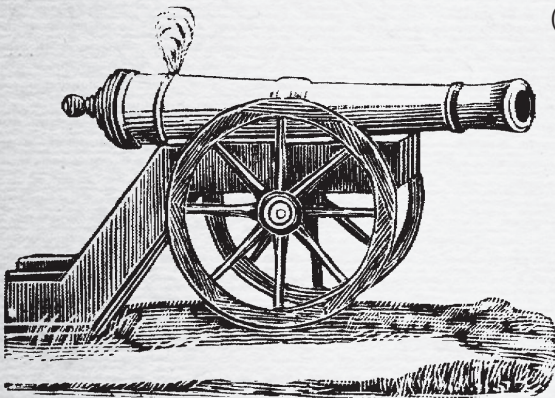
To the Founders, liberty was not a new or abstract concept. It was a real, vital part of their daily lives; they had lived in relative freedom even under Britain’s rule, and thus they were the more keenly aware when England began to strip that freedom away. To the Founding generation, freedom was not a bargaining chip, to be used to barter for privileges or material gain. Instead, they understood freedom to be both a right and a sacred responsibility—one to be guarded jealously. They knew freedom couldn’t preserve itself—it would survive and thrive only as long as each generation actively *used* it and passed it on to the next generation.

So when the Founding Fathers were faced with the task of drafting the Declaration of Independence—and later, the U.S. Constitution—they drew heavily on their rich storehouse of heritage and history. Today, it is popular to teach that these documents were simply products of the age in which they were written, and that they are now mostly out of date. But on the contrary, these documents, in essence, were the products of many ages and generations of thought and practice. The Founding Fathers were keenly aware of this: they recognized that they had come to a critical moment in human history—a moment that would determine the character of ages to come. “You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live,” wrote John Adams to his friend and colleague, George Wythe, in 1776. He continued:

How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government, more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children! When, before the present epocha [*sic*], had three millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive?³

So, where did the Founders get their principles? How did they know where to look as they drew the blueprint of a nation? A detailed look at our multilayered heritage, as well as a study of the Founders’ education, sources, and intellects, would take many more pages than we can use here. But a brief summary of our heritage would serve us well. We draw our moral, philosophical, legal, and cultural heritage primarily from the civilizations listed below:⁴

(Note that the concepts and beliefs expressed below are descriptions of the beliefs of the cultures listed.)



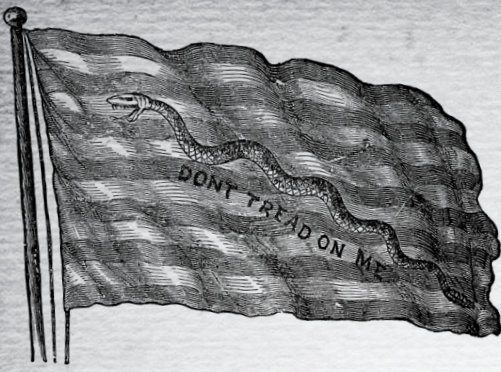
The Hebrews

We owe much to the Ancient Hebrews, a people whom God redeemed from slavery in Egypt and brought into Canaan, the Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey.”⁵ Many of the earliest European settlers in America—notably the Puritans—borrowed much inspiration from the Old Testament record and imagery, as did later groups of great freedom fighters, such as African Americans and the abolitionists who fought to end slavery.

From the Hebrews we inherited concepts foundational to our *moral thought*:

- **Moral Awareness: Humans are Accountable to Their Creator**

The most fundamental relationship in the history of time is that between the Creator (God) and the created. Out of all His creatures, God granted humans the gifts of communication and volition (the ability to choose one’s own way), but He ultimately requires each person to account



for his or her deeds, whether good or evil. Humans are instinctively aware of an existence higher than their own, and of a law that rewards right actions and punishes wrong ones.

- **Natural Law: There is an Order Inherent in the Universe**

The Creator has instilled order within the universe, designing it to operate according to certain laws. His patterns are evident in the changing of the seasons, the orbit of celestial bodies, and the continual cycle of life and death. He has given humans the ability to discern this order and these laws by observing these patterns in action.

- **Inherent Dignity: Humans are Created in the Image of God**

The human is the only creature that God stamped with His own image; He also breathed life into him, making him superior to other living creatures. Though humans have corrupted their nature through sin, they retain, by grace, the identifying mark of God's image. Because of this, man has an inherent dignity that must not be violated. No man has a right to humiliate, defile, abuse, or enslave another, but instead has a duty to respect each person's rights, body, and property.

- **Necessity of Law: Humans are Fallen Creatures**

When humans rejected God's authority in the Garden of Eden, they fell from grace and became fallen creatures. This fallen and carnal nature, which is passed from generation to generation, provokes people to do what they *can*, not what they *should*. In order to preserve order in society, the Founders believed that man's fallen nature must be restrained through law.

The Greeks

The Ancient Greeks were one of the first peoples to intentionally organize their society according to democratic principles. The works, sayings, and deeds of the great Greek philosophers and statesmen—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Solon, Pericles—were widely studied, quoted, and respected among educated American colonials.

From the Greeks we inherited some of the foundational principles of our *political philosophy*:

- **The Human is a Rational Being**

The Greeks recognized humans' rational capacity—a capacity that sets them apart from other living creatures. Humans alone have the ability, through reason, to discover qualities about themselves, their world, and the universe; they also have the ability to use this knowledge to improve their personal character and the communities in which they live.

- **The Human is a Social Animal**

The Greeks believed that the human is a social animal whose nature compels him to associate with other humans. They posited that, since no individual can achieve true self-sufficiency on his own, people must form communities in order to provide for themselves collectively and individually. The ideal of such a community, said the Greeks, is the *polis*, in which every citizen achieves moral perfection through his or her service to the collective body.

- **Order is Required in both the Soul and Society**

Ethics and politics were closely related in Greek thought. The philosophers believed that both the human soul and civil society operate according to the same natural principles. Both also require

order. The Greeks believed that every society is, essentially, a reflection of the souls of its citizens. A citizen must tame the passions battling within his soul by cultivating a lifestyle of virtue; and when citizens' souls are in order, civil society will follow suit.

- **Politics is a Science**

The Greeks laid the foundations of political science. They were the first people to discuss in depth the different stages of human association, the merits of various political models, and the tendency of man-made governments to succumb to tyranny.⁶

The Romans

The Romans—a remarkable people of great military and engineering capacity—conquered and subjugated much of the ancient world, including Greece. While the Romans tended to rule their subjects with an iron hand, they also pioneered the codification of law and made advances in the concepts of liberty, the separation of powers in government, and the balancing tension of the individual's relationship with the state.

We inherited from Rome, via the English, the foundations of our *legal thought*:

- **Man's Legal Capacity and the Foundation of Civil Law**

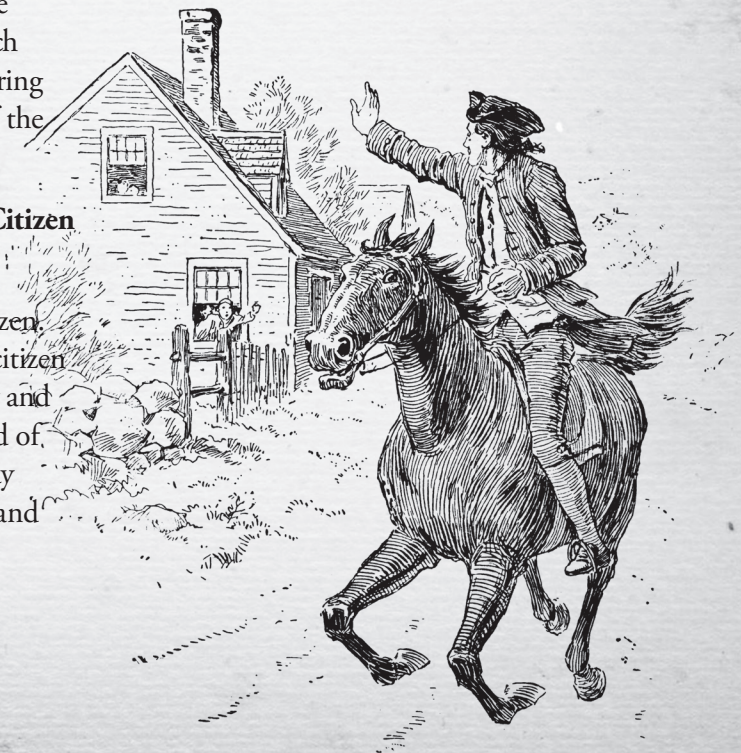
Liberty, the Romans believed, was a special gift to their people from the gods, and was thus the inviolable possession of every citizen. They placed great emphasis on law as the safeguard of this freedom and the preservative of their unique culture. The Romans believed that good laws protected the people from the overarching power of the state and also defended the state's authority against the whims of the people.

- **The Concept of *Patria***

Romans referred to their land as "*patria*" (Latin for "fatherland"). They viewed the state as a benevolent parent who cared for the welfare of its citizens. The Romans believed that they had a divine mission to conquer the world; the state was the "being," so to speak, by which they could accomplish this mission and bring all peoples under the refining influence of the Empire.

- **The Duties and Qualities of the Loyal Citizen**

The focus of Roman political life was the relationship between the state and the citizen. The state protected and provided for the citizen in exchange for his or her undying loyalty and service. Citizens were constantly reminded of their duty to the state by the public display of patriotic emblems, statuary, uniforms, and architecture.

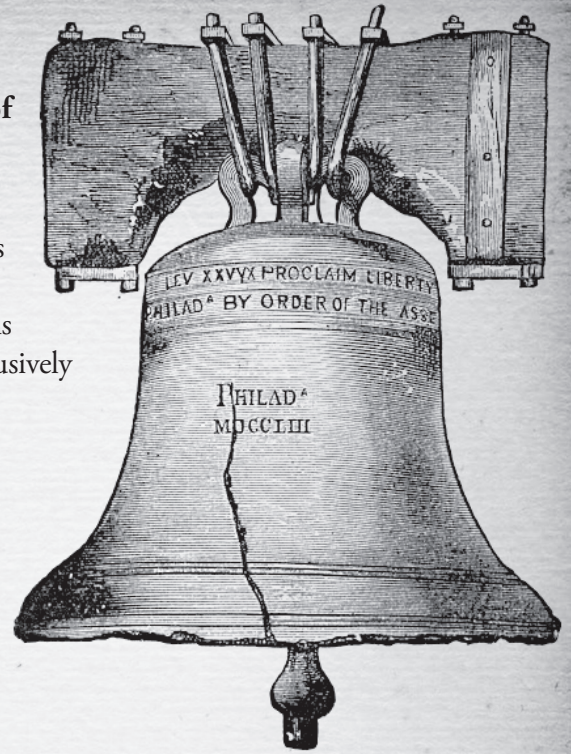


- **Beginnings of Representative Government and Separation of Powers**

In some ways, the Roman government was designed to safeguard the liberty of the individual citizen. At different times throughout the Empire's history, political power was divided among public officials and political bodies. Each class of citizens had power to elect representatives, and no single authority exclusively held power to make laws or pass judgment.

The English

While several European nations explored and invested in the New World, the English ultimately won dominance over the continent and put down the deepest roots. It is from the English, therefore, that America largely draws its concepts of *government*:



- **Common Law**

The common law is a body of non-codified laws, customs, and juridical decisions that the English have traditionally regarded as their sovereign legal authority. The common law is not the creation of a single individual or generation; rather, it has evolved over several generations and has been tested, modified, and approved by each one. Because the common law is rooted in natural law, it commands equal authority over all citizens, king and commoner alike. This rule of law protects the liberty of the individual, enabling him or her to exercise responsibly the rights to life and property.

- **Concept of Self-Government**

The Protestant Reformation emphasized the concept that Christ is the only mediator necessary between God and humans. Therefore, no temporal power can exercise authority over a person's conscience, nor has it the right to violate his or her God-given liberties. Every person has a responsibility to look after his or her behavior and to cultivate a clean conscience. Temporal or governmental authorities exist not to interpret the law according to their own whims, but instead to uphold the law by rewarding those who keep it and punishing those who violate it.

- **Representative Government and Separation of Powers**

The English adhered to the maxim, *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur*. "What concerns all, ought to be approved by all."⁷ Accordingly, the English created Parliament to represent the interests of the people before the King. Parliament consists of two houses, Lords and Commons. Though each of these houses exert influence, the House of Commons is the more powerful, exercising both the power of the purse and the ability to make laws. The model of Parliament heavily influenced the design of America's bicameral legislature.

- **Balance of Power: The Tension between Church and State**

During the Middle Ages, the nobles, the clergy, and the common people grappled with each other for power. Each of these groups filled a unique role within society, and the tension between the three barred any one of them from wielding too much authority. The power that they exercised collectively prevented the centralization of power within the government. This tension of power evolved into the concept of "checks and balances."

Why Listen to Dead, White, Wig-Wearing Men?

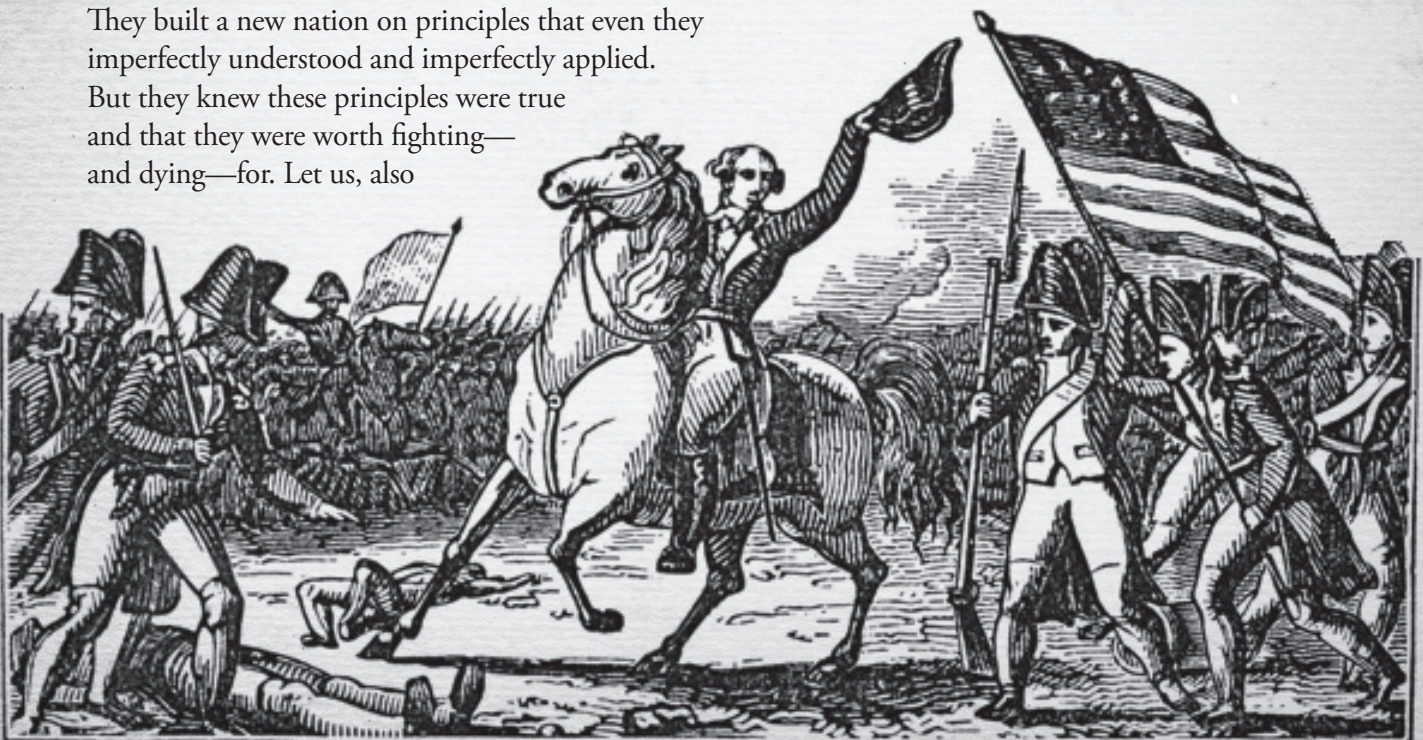
Popular rhetoric today tries to teach us that the Founders were actually rather un-extraordinary men. They were motivated, we are told, by economic interests, by their social standing, and by their own self-interest. While the rhetoric sometimes exaggerates, it is important to recognize that much of it is at least partly true—the signers of the Declaration of Independence, for instance, were indeed all white men. Some were farmers and tradesmen, but others, like John Hancock, were men of great means and very wealthy. And some inexcusably owned slaves. They were imperfect men; they had vices that are not to be glossed over or excused; it is important in our treatment of the Founders that we not turn a blind eye to their humanness. However, the remarkable feature of the Founders is that they were aware of this weakness—if not of their personal weakness, at least of the weakness of the whole human race. This awareness, in fact, formed the basis of many of their most important decisions as they designed the American government. They also learned the lesson of human fallibility the hard way, as we shall see in later pamphlets.

Let us also remember that the world in which the Founders lived was very different from our own—a world much less diverse in the way that we understand “diverse” today. But our world today *is* so diverse precisely because of the ideas that these white, wig-wearing, imperfect men put down on paper.

The Founding Fathers did not have the precedents that we have today. No group of people had ever done what they did, which makes their deeds all the more extraordinary. It is precisely *because* they thought “outside the box” of their own generation that they were able to do what no one else had ever done. And in 1776, the Founders had no guarantee that their efforts would succeed, or that they would even survive. They could not put confidence in their manpower or their resources, but they could and *did* put confidence in their principles because they knew they were true. How did they know this? Because these principles were *transcendent*. The reason these principles have survived, prospered, and stood the test of time is because they are *timeless*. And our nation has survived and prospered because the Founders had the foresight and breadth of vision to look beyond their own communities, culture, generation, and time, and to base our government on these principles. They looked back and learned from history what had worked and what didn't. They understood the unflattering aspects of human nature, and instead of glossing over them, they confronted them and built safeguards against them.

They built a new nation on principles that even they imperfectly understood and imperfectly applied.

But they knew these principles were true and that they were worth fighting—and dying—for. Let us, also



imperfect, follow their example.

Let us not pin our hopes or try to build our future on the fads or “ologies” or even movements of the moment, but instead upon the principles that have stood the test of time. The time has come to renew those principles in our nation—to learn to apply them in the age in which we now live.

The United States of America has produced more freedom and created more opportunities—and offered a refuge and a home—for more people than any other single nation the world has ever known. While our nation has continued to learn painful lessons from our experiences with injustice and prejudice, America has shown remarkable resilience, a capacity to learn from its mistakes, and an ability to continue surging forward more than almost any other people. While every generation is shaped to an extent by its social and historical context, it is shortsighted to interpret the Founders and their principles this way. In fact, to do so would be grossly hypocritical, for we as a people have continued to operate on these principles—to great success both socially and economically—over the decades since the Constitution was signed. These principles took a small agrarian nation on the edge of a Eurocentric world and made it one of the greatest nations, if not the greatest, the world has ever seen. So the Founding principles must be worth examining, preserving, and emulating: you can tell a lot about an idea from the fruit it produces.

Our need today is not so much to *return* to the principles of the Founding as it is to *renew* them, apply them afresh, in our age. We have drifted away from the principles, but like a ship on stormy seas, the clouds have broken and we can see the North Star again. These principles stand as an enduring testimony, pointing out the path of freedom for all people—they remain stalwart, time-tested, and true, and they show us the way we must go.

Endnotes

1. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Garry Wills (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 66-67.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 67.
3. John Adams, *Thoughts on Government* (Philadelphia: Pamphlet printed by John Dunlap, 1776; Boston: Reprinted by John Gill, in Queen-Street, 1776). Accessed online at http://www.pbs.org/vgbh/amex/adams/filmmore/ps_thoughts.html.
4. The concept for this section was drawn largely from two excellent sources: *The Roots of American Order*, by Russell Kirk (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), and *Deliver Us From Evil: Restoring the Soul in a Disintegrating Culture*, by Ravi Zacharias (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1997).
5. Exodus 3:7-8, New International Version. “The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.’”
6. Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 197-198.



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