

America's Founding Principles in the 21st Century

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"These great and dangerous errors have their origin in the prevalent opinion that all men are born free and equal;— than which nothing can be more unfounded and false."¹ In these words, John C. Calhoun, one of the leading southern politicians prior to the civil war, attacked the principles of the American founding as false and irrelevant. Lincoln correctly identified this disagreement on founding principles as a "house divided against itself" in his 1858 House Divided **speech**,² for, as he pointed out in the Gettysburg address, this nation was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."³ Do we still live in a house divided? Have the foundations of this house become irrelevant and false? In his work, "The New Freedom," Woodrow Wilson argued, "The Declaration of Independence did not mention the questions of our day," pointing out that its principles and those of the Constitution stemmed from rigid, Newtonian ideas of absolutes rather than the evolving ideas of Darwin which speak to the present needs of society.⁴ Today we will look at critiques of the founding principles. Have the waves and the winds of time made our foundation obsolete, unable to withstand today's storms? Have progressives like Woodrow Wilson provided a firmer, more relevant foundation from which to build this house, even if they have divided it against the original founding principles? Next we will examine the idea of absolute principles and the nature of America's founding principles. Finally, I will show that America's founding principles truly provide a relevant foundation from which to build a house united.

In "The Future of Liberalism," John Dewey identifies and attacks the ideas of the founders, saying, "The fundamental defect was lack of perception of historic relativity. This lack

¹ John Calhoun, "Disquisition on Government," in Teaching American History Document Library <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=479>.

² Abraham Lincoln, "House Divided Speech," in Teaching American History Document Library, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=103>.

³ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," 1863, American Heritage: A Reader, 2nd ed., ed. Hillsdale College History Department (Acton, MA: Tapestry, 2001).

⁴ Woodrow Wilson, "The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People," in Vindicating the Founders Document Library, <http://www.vindicatingthefounders.com/library/index.asp?document=48>.

is expressed in the conception of the individual as something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual. . .”⁵ Because, as Dewey argued, man's nature is changing, Woodrow Wilson can argue, in his work *The New Freedom*, that government must also be "necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life." Government must not be limited by things like checks and balances, but must be able to respond *quickly* to the changing needs of society. Franklin Roosevelt agrees with the progressive critique in his Commonwealth Club Address, saying that new situations have dictated a new end for government. While the founders had to free people from political oppression, the government must now free people from economic oppression.⁶ These men all held that the laws and principles, the blueprints and plans of the founders could no longer hold true for them. Because man is always changing, traditional ideas about man's government will never remain completely true and we must always look forward to the needs and changes of the future.

How have the ideas of the progressives freed us from the walls constructed by the founders and allowed us to solve the problems of today's society? What are the implications of this new foundation? In their essay, "The Rise and Decline of Constitutional Government in America," Thomas West and Douglas Jeffrey point out that the progressive rejection of limited, constitutional government has led to an expansion of governmental power, regulation, and bureaucracy in the form of a welfare state. With an antiquated constitution, the federal government now has the right and obligation to redefine the principles of liberty in order to fix the problems of society and create a happier people.⁷

The current progressive **mindset** not only attacks the founding principles but the very idea that

⁵ John Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 32 (1935), 226.
www.jstor.org.

⁶ Franklin Roosevelt, "Commonwealth Club Address," in *American Heritage: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. History Department, Hillsdale College (Acton, MA: Tapestry, 2001), 488-490.

⁷ Thomas G. West and Douglas A. Jeffery, "The **Rise** and Decline of Constitutional Government in America," *Vindicating the Founders* essay, <http://www.vindicatingthefounders.com/essay2.html>.

founding principles can remain true from one generation to the next. Therefore, before we can consider the relevance and truth of the founding principles, we must consider whether any principles can remain relevant throughout history. If we look at the creation around us, we see that certain fundamental laws exist whether we believe them or not. Take the law of gravity, for instance. Every time I jump off this building, I will always fall, no matter how hard I believe that man or the world is changing. Just as we can look at the world around us and deduce certain truths about physics, chemistry, and astronomy, which men have observed for hundreds of years, so too, we can look at the world around us and deduce truths about man's nature and his government which the founders and men before them have also deduced.

What truths, then, did the founders deduce about the world which caused them to construct this house in this way? In the Declaration of Independence, the thirteen colonies gave their reasons for separation from Great Britain by stating fundamental, "self-evident" ideas about the nature of man and the nature of government. First, they believed that all men are created equal because all have been "endowed by their Creator" with the "unalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."⁸ The declaration points out, though, that governments must be instituted to "secure" the **rights** of the people, thereby operating on the presupposition that, if left to their own designs, people, who by nature possess all of these rights will by nature seek their own gratification to the harm of the life, liberty, and happiness of others. Thus, the Declaration goes on to articulate the end of government in its second set of fundamental principles. It points out that given man's nature people must together lay the foundations of government "on such principles as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."⁹ Does this mean that government must provide for the instant happiness of every person? The founders had a different understanding of the word "happiness" which came from their observation of absolute

⁸Declaration of Independence.

⁹ Ibid.

truths and the observations of humans throughout history. For instance, John Adams, in his work, *Thoughts on Government*, says,

All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue. Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Mahomet, not to mention authorities really sacred, have agreed in this. . . ."¹⁰

But where does this virtue come from? George Washington, in his Farewell Address, agrees that virtue (or, as he calls it, "morality") must exist for the happiness of humankind. However, he points out that morality cannot survive without religion. He says, "Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?"¹¹ The founders believed that certain truths about man and his government in a society must inform all political systems. The Creator of man has given all men rights but man will abuse these rights and harm others. He must therefore agree together with other men to establish a government. By nature, this government of created men obtains its power from fellow created men and it is established to provide safety and a happiness grounded in virtue, religion, and morality.

These principles about man's nature and the nature of government may sound plausible in theory, but how could we apply them to our situation today? Are they relevant, or, as Woodrow Wilson argued, do they need to be re-made? What happens when individual citizens and government seek happiness as John Adams and the other founders understood it, a happiness grounded in virtue and religion? The just citizen will give an equitable wage and work hard to deserve fair wages. The prudent citizen will save his own money for retirement and teach his children to do so as well. The courageous citizen will stand up for what is right and fight when his

¹⁰ John Adams, *Thoughts on Government*, 1776, Teaching American History Document Library, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=37>.

¹¹ George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796, in *American Heritage: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. History Department, Hillsdale College (Acton, MA: Tapestry, 2001), 142.

republic calls. The temperate citizen will use alcohol and drugs with wisdom and **moderation**.¹²

The citizen of faith, remembering that God sees his actions, will take responsibility for what he does rather than engage in frivolous lawsuits. The hopeful citizen will look forward to eternity but still

vote and become involved in his government in the hope that virtuous governors may be **elected**.¹³

The loving citizen will care for each person, regardless of race, creed, color, or sex. In addition to recognizing the good an individual can do, we must, like the founders, recognize man's propensity for evil and restrict that, through government. The late President Gerald Ford understood that we must continue to apply these principles of limited government and virtuous society in his remarks after **Nixon's** resignation. He said, "Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy." Ford here rearticulated the concept that Aristotle, **Livy**, John Adams and the Founders all agreed upon. He believed that certain laws about the happiness of mankind grounded in virtue and religion still held true for society. These laws were relevant during Watergate and they are relevant today for Jack Abramoff, Billy Graham, **Saddam Hussein**, and George Bush.

Prior to the civil war, men like John C. Calhoun sought to deny the fundamental principles of the American founding, declaring that all men were not born free and equal. Lincoln and those who opposed him in the same house had to ask themselves whether their fundamental principles would be refined as gold in the fire or be burned as straw in the heat of battle? The foundations of that house, while scorched and weathered, remained through the storms of Shiloh and the fires of Fredericksburg. These foundations can also survive today's societal storms. Virtuous individual citizens can apply justice, prudence, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love to the problems of social security, health care, tort reform, war, poverty, and crime in their day to day lives. As we continue to follow the founding principles of limited government and happiness grounded in

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), **78-79**.

¹³ *Ibid.*, **136-137**.

virtue, the blueprints of this nation, our house too will cease to be divided against its own foundations. I hope, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."¹⁴

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¹⁴Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 326.

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