

This is a Commentary On [First Principles](#) and [Political Thought](#)

## The Rediscovery of America: Here's the Best Ground from Which to Repulse the Whole Progressive Project

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *In his new book, [We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future](#) (ISI Books), Matthew Spalding defines America's foundational principles, shows how they have come under assault by modern progressive-liberalism and lays out a strategy to recover them in American society. In this adapted excerpt, Spalding argues that the choice is between continued decline into a European-style, centralized state or rededication to the principles of liberty.*

By any measure, the United States of America is a great nation. Thirteen colonies are now 50 states covering a vast continent and beyond. The U.S. economy accounts for almost a quarter of the total gross domestic product of all the countries in the world.

The strongest military force on Earth allows the United States to extend its power anywhere. The American people remain among the most hardworking, churchgoing, affluent, and generous. Just as George Washington predicted, the United States is a sovereign nation "in command of its own fortunes."

And yet it seems we are on a course of self-destruction.

Every nation derives meaning and purpose from some unifying quality -- an ethnic character, a common religion, a shared history. America is different. Unique among the nations, America was founded at a particular time, by a particular people, on the basis of a particular idea.

At its birth, this nation justified its independence by asserting truths said to be self-evident, according to "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God." Working from the great principle of human equality, the revolutionaries who launched this experiment in popular government claimed a new basis of political legitimacy: the consent of those governed. Through a carefully written constitution, they created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law.

With this structure, they sought to establish true religious liberty, provide for economic opportunity, secure national independence, and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government -- all in the name of a simple but radical idea of human liberty.

The founding of the United States was indeed revolutionary, but not in the sense of replacing one set of rulers with another or overthrowing the institutions of society. Our American Revolution was about the ideas upon which a new nation was to be established. Permanent truths "applicable to all men and all times," as Abraham Lincoln later said, proclaimed that principle -- rather than will -- would be the ultimate ground of government.

What is truly revolutionary about America is that for the first time in human history these universal ideas became the foundation of a particular system of government and its political culture. It was because of these principles, not despite them, that, rather than ending in tyranny, the American Revolution culminated in a constitutional government that has long endured.

These core principles came under direct assault at the start of the last century, when "progressive" thinkers sought to refound America according to ideas alien to those of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison.

These "progressives" repudiated the Founders' principles, holding that there are no self-evident truths -- in the Declaration of Independence or elsewhere -- but only relative values. There are no permanent rights with which man is endowed, they claimed, but only changing rights held at the indulgence of government. We must be governed by a "living" Constitution that endlessly evolves and grows with the times.

The progressive view of the United States has driven American politics and the rise of big government in the 20th century. Today this view dominates the academy, the media, intellectual elites, and major portions of the leadership in both political parties. The Progressive Movement, under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, set forth the platform for modern liberalism:

Progress means a new form of government able to engineer a better society, assuring equal outcomes and redistributing wealth through a distant and patronizing welfare state that regulates more and more of America's economy, politics, and society. The New Deal and the Great Society were grand steps toward achieving this platform. We are in the beginning of a more aggressive move in this direction, but the ideas behind it are over a century old.

The path we are following is turning America into a centralized, European-style state: stifled by a highly regulated economy, nationalized industries and socialized health care, ruled more by bureaucrats than elected legislatures, with more allegiance to international organizations than our own country.

This is not progress but the revival of a failed, undemocratic, and illiberal form of statism. More than 170 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville warned of a new form of despotism that reduces a self-governing people to "nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd." Denying the truth of America's principles for the sake of such "change" can make no claim to progress at all.

There is another way forward. The slow Europeanization of America is not inevitable, and it's not too late. But it will take a monumental effort to get our country back on track.

We don't need to remake America, or discover new and untested principles. The change we need is not the rejection of America's principles but a great renewal of the foundational principles and constitutional wisdom that are the true roots of our country's greatness.

We must look to the principles of the American founding -- its philosophical grounding, practical wisdom, and limitless spirit of self-government and independence -- not as a matter of historical

curiosity but as a source of assurance and direction for our times. In a world of moral confusion, and of arbitrary and unlimited government, the founding is our best access to permanent truths. And it's our best ground from which to launch a radical questioning of the whole foundation of the progressive project to remake America.

Reclaiming our future requires a concerted effort to push back the progressive assault on liberty and recover the founding principles in our political culture. We should focus attention on six areas:

**Educate for Liberty.** In the classroom, high schools largely ignore, minimize, or disparage the story of America's founding. Students can graduate from top colleges and universities without taking a single course in U.S. history. Dominated by relativism and historicism, too many of our schools, colleges and universities justify neglect of the founding by arguing it is too outdated and difficult to explain. Or they fixate on acknowledged flaws and alleged errors of the founding in view of modern values. By doing so, they subvert the principles of liberty and constitutional government. We must reverse course and commit ourselves at every level of education to promote awareness and appreciation of founding principles.

**Engage the American Mind.** We need to make a clear and forthright defense of core principles. We must apply the principles creatively to questions of the day, supporting positions consistent with them and reframing the national debate about the most serious issues. Despite constant criticism and scorn by academic elites, politicians and the popular media, most Americans still believe in the uniqueness of this country and respect the noble ideas put forth by the Founders. We must give voice to those who haven't given up on the American experiment in self-government, concluded the cause is lost and accepted decline as inevitable.

**Uphold the Constitution.** We need political leaders who understand and uphold America's principles. Public officials take a solemn oath to support the Constitution, which means they have a moral obligation to abide by the founding document in carrying out the duties of office. For members of Congress, this means determining constitutional authority for bills they pass. For the president, it means considering the constitutionality of legislation, withholding approval of bills deemed unconstitutional, and executing the law in a constitutional manner. Judges are in a unique position to spell out the meaning and consequences of the Constitution. However, it is imperative to understand -- and for judges to recognize -- they are not above, outside, or immune from the constraints of that document.

**Defend Free Markets and Fiscal Responsibility.** The fruits of hard work and entrepreneurship for the sake of improving the condition of self and family are moral goods that contribute to human happiness. So are the opportunities long associated with pursuit of the American Dream. All have the added virtue of harnessing enlightened self-interest to serve the common good and limited, constitutional government. At a time when the American system of democratic capitalism is under concerted attack, we must reconnect economic arguments for liberty and prosperity with the moral case for equal opportunity, free enterprise, and human creativity.

**Revive Self-Government.** In assuming more and more tasks in more and more areas outside its responsibilities, modern government greatly damaged American self-rule. By promoting an

entitlement mentality and dependency rather than self-reliance and independence, administrative government encourages a character that is incompatible with republicanism. The state's extended reach -- fueled by its imperative to impose moral neutrality on the public square -- continues to push traditional social institutions into the shadows. We must reverse this trend and restore the standing and influence of social institutions meant to strengthen the fabric of culture and civil society.

**Promote Liberty in the World.** By the very nature of the principles upon which the Founders established it, the United States -- more than any other nation in history -- has a special responsibility to defend not only the cause of liberty but the meaning of liberty at home and abroad. This is why friends of freedom everywhere have looked to this country and drawn inspiration from our ideas, example and actions. A confident understanding of America's principles, and a renewed sense of our independence and purpose, is a reaffirmation of what we hold to be self-evident. Anything less would be to deny our birthright and undermine our moral standing in the world.

Levi Preston of Danvers, Mass., was in his early 20s in the spring of 1775 when he fought in the Battle of Concord at the opening of the American Revolution. Many years later, Captain Preston was asked why he went to fight that day.

Was it the intolerable oppressions of British colonial policy, or the Stamp Act? "I never saw any stamps," Preston replied. What about the tax on tea? "I never drank a drop of the stuff; the boys threw it all overboard."

It must have been all his reading of Harrington, Sidney, and Locke on the principles of liberty? "Never heard of 'em. We read only the Bible, the catechism, Watt's Psalms and Hymns, and the Almanack."

Well, what was it? asked Preston's interviewer. What made you take up arms against the British?

"Young man, what we meant in going for those redcoats was this: We always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should."

The Founders knew the perpetuation of liberty would depend on spirited citizens and patriotic statesmen actively engaged in the democratic task of governing themselves, holding to the truths of 1776. This constant challenge is the reason American constitutionalism was from the beginning, and will remain, an experiment.

In the midst of the many other challenges we face -- unsustainable federal spending and increasing debt, the future burden of social welfare entitlements, national security in a dangerous world -- the real crisis tearing at the American soul is not a lack of courage or solutions as much as a loss of conviction.

Do we still hold these truths? Do the principles that inspired the American founding retain their relevance in the 21st century? We will find it difficult to know what to do and how to do it as long as we are not sure who we are and what we believe.

We must restore America's principles -- the truths to which we are dedicated -- as the central idea of our nation's public philosophy. But before we can rededicate ourselves as a nation to these principles, we must rediscover them as a people.

Only when we know these principles once again can we renew America.

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