

Contents



Foreword by <i>William J. Bennett</i>	xi
Introduction: Curiosities in Glass Cases	1
1 A New Nation, Conceived in Liberty: The Roots of American Freedom	7
2 We Hold These Truths: Equality, Natural Rights, and the Consent of the Governed	29
3 Of Faith and Reason: The Establishment of Religious Freedom	51
4 The Fire of Opportunity: Private Property and the Spirit of Enterprise	67
5 Rule of Law: The Great Foundation of Our Constitution	81
6 Constitutionalism in Principle: The Architecture of Limited Government	99
7 Constitutionalism in Practice: The Workings of Ordered Liberty	117

8	The Virtues of Self-Government: Building Community, Forming Character, and Making Citizens	135
9	The Command of Our Fortunes: Sovereign Independence and America's Role in the World	161
10	A New Republic: The Progressive Assault on the Founders' Principles	187
11	American Renewal: The Case for Reclaiming Our Future	215
	Bibliographic Essay and Organizational Resources	241
	Acknowledgments	253
	Index	255

Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it on to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States when men were free.

—Ronald Reagan

Introduction



Curiosities in Glass Cases

Not far from the United States Capitol, just down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., is the magnificent building of the National Archives of the United States. Designed by the great American architect John Russell Pope, its façade, columns, massive bronze doors, and central rotunda are intended to evoke classical Greek themes as well as the neoclassical style of the Roman Pantheon.

The temples of the ancient world were grand monuments constructed to provide sacrifices to the pagan gods, and the Pantheon was to be the grandest—the temple of all the gods, where the victorious Romans kept their conquered deities and worshipped their Caesars. The difference between these two structures—the Pantheon and the National Archives—could not be more striking, or more significant.

At the entrance of the Pantheon were huge statues of Caesar Augustus, the first emperor, and Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the Roman general responsible for most of Caesar's military triumphs. The reigning emperor was to be enthroned in its rotunda, wielding power at the center of the Roman Empire, around which the world and the heavens revolved.

In the rotunda of the National Archives building there are no statues of dead rulers, symbols of political power, or emblems of military glory. Instead, in the center of this temple, upon a simple marble altar, are two

faded documents enshrined in glass cases. Mere words, handwritten on a few sheets of parchment.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”



In 1776, when it announced itself to the world, America was little more than a potential nation of thirteen small colonies on a barren continent, thousands of miles from their ancestral homeland, surrounded by hostile powers.

Well over two centuries later—having won its independence from the British Empire, established its sovereign nationhood, completed its continental expansion and brought unprecedented prosperity to its citizens, survived a devastating Civil War that threatened its very life, abolished slavery and raised up the emancipated to be citizens equal to their one-time masters, and triumphed in two world wars fought on foreign soil and a decades-long struggle against worldwide communism—the United States has become the freest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation in the world.

What is to account for this monumental success?

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 of the world, 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 men 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. “What do we mean by the American Revolution?” queried John Adams. “The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the *real* American Revolution.”*

Our 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.

To this day, so many years after the American Revolution, these principles—proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and promulgated by the United States Constitution—still define us as a nation and inspire us as a people. They are responsible for a prosperous and just nation unlike any in the world. They are the highest achievements of our tradition, serving not only as a powerful beacon to those throughout the world who strive for freedom and seek to vindicate self-government but also a warning to tyrants and despots everywhere. It is *because* of these principles, not despite them, that America has achieved its greatness.

Can a nation so conceived and dedicated endure? From the beginning this has been the key question.

When Benjamin Franklin departed the Constitutional Convention, he was asked by an acquaintance if the framers meeting in Philadelphia had created a monarchy or a republic. “A republic,” he famously replied, but then added, “*if you can keep it.*” Our nation’s Founders knew that the perpetuation of liberty would always depend on spirited citizens and patriotic statesmen actively engaged in the democratic task of governing themselves, holding to the truths of 1776.

Today, according to numerous studies, most of our high-school and college students do not know the basic facts of American history. They consistently score poorly in virtually every measure of civic knowledge.

* All the quotes in this book can be found in a searchable database at: WeStillHoldTheseTruths.org.

But while there is much that we have forgotten, this is not simply a case of national amnesia. This distressing state signals a larger systemic problem.

In many circles, especially among the learned elites of our universities and law schools—those who teach the next generation, shape our popular culture, and set the terms of our political discourse—the self-evident truths upon which America depends have been supplanted by the passionately held belief that no such truths exist, certainly no truths applicable to all time. Over the past century the federal government has lost much of its mooring, and today acts with little regard for the limits placed upon it by the Constitution, which many now regard as obsolete. On both the Left and the Right, our political leaders are increasingly unsure of their way, speaking in inspiring generalities, all the while mired in small-minded politics and petty debates. As a nation, we are left divided about our own meaning, unable—perhaps unwilling—to defend our ideas, our institutions, and maybe even ourselves.

From the decline of civic education to the rise of a politics of government dependency, these societal problems are rooted in a deep confusion about the meaning and status of America's core principles. In the midst of the many challenges we face—unsustainable spending and increasing debt, the future burden of social welfare entitlements, national security in a dangerous world—the real crisis that tears 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 twenty-first 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. That is the purpose of this book: to recall America's first principles as they were understood by our Founders, in the context of our nation's history and its constitutional development from roots deep in Western civilization.

The following chapters seek to explain and bring to life ten core principles that define our national creed and common purpose: *liberty* is the grand, overarching theme of our nation's history; *equality*, *natural rights*, and the *consent of the governed* are the foundational principles

that set the compass of our politics; *religious liberty* and *private property* follow from these, shaping the parameters of our nation's day-to-day life; the *rule of law* and a *constitutionalism* of limited government define the architecture that undergirds our liberty; all of these principles culminate in *self-government*, in the political sense of republican governance and the moral sense of governing ourselves; and lastly, *independence* encompasses the meaning of America's principles in the world.

Only when we *know* these principles once again can we renew America. Only when we understand the significance of these principles can we grasp the nobility of our accomplishments as a people and see how far we have strayed off course as a nation. Only then can we realize the societal choices before us and begin to develop a strategy to reclaim our future.



The National Archives building was designed to publicly house and display together for the first time the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. There was a solemn ceremony when it was dedicated in 1952. The chief justice of the United States presided and the chaplain of the Senate gave an invocation, but the main speaker was the president of the United States, Harry S. Truman.

Recall that these were the dark days of the Cold War. An iron curtain had descended across Europe, the Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb, and China had fallen to communism. The United States was bogged down in a military stalemate in Korea. The West seemed to be fighting rear-guard battles against a steadily advancing enemy. Truman wondered whether liberty could ever be lost in this country. His answer to his own question had nothing to do with world events.

Liberty “can be lost, and it will be,” Truman observed, “if the time ever comes when these documents are regarded not as the supreme expression of our profound belief, but merely as curiosities in glass cases.”

This cannot—this must not—be allowed to happen. We may take some comfort in recognizing that every generation finds it necessary to relearn our history and the heritage of freedom. As it was with our forefathers, so it is now our task to ensure that the liberating principles of liberty are securely enshrined in the hearts and minds of the American people.

LIBERTY

EQUALITY

NATURAL RIGHTS

CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

PRIVATE PROPERTY

THE RULE OF LAW

CONSTITUTIONALISM

SELF-GOVERNMENT

INDEPENDENCE