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Creed and Culture: "Self-Evident" Truths and the Formation of the American Mind

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The Declaration of Independence's self-evident truths are moral affirmations rooted in a shared vision of God, human nature, and political purpose. Early Americans did not simply assent to notions of human equality, rights, and just government. They imbibed and lived them. For our Republic to last for another 250 years, we must revive the moral and cultural conditions that make these truths evident. To revive the American mind and heart, we must restore the sources of moral unity and prosperity. The health of our religious and virtue-forming institutions must therefore become a central concern of public life. Moral formation begins in the family but is sustained and reinforced in schools, churches, and civic associations that cultivate shared habits and loyalties.

Introduction

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we should reflect once again on its famous second paragraph, which begins, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Though we Americans in the 21st century still know the Declaration's preamble, our hearts and minds have a much looser grip on the cultural and moral foundations that once made it intelligible. We can trace this confusion in large part to the rise of Progressivism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which severed the link between natural rights and a transcendent moral order.

American identity underwent further shifts with the rise of Communism. Efforts to defeat Communism in the Cold War were often coupled with the tendency to treat America simply as a nation of ideas that could easily be exported to the rest of the world to counter the universal, revolutionary maxims of the Soviet Union.[1] American ideas of equality, rights, and democracy became untethered from the institutions, culture, people, and place in which they prospered.

The Declaration is, on this view, a creed that not only applies to the rest of humanity, but might easily be exported to it. This abstract "creedal" notion of American identity remains prevalent, though the prospects for its universal application through "nation building" programs have waned.[2] Efforts to export American ideals abroad have in turn bred pessimism toward our Founding principles themselves. The debate has often taken the form of *creed versus culture*.[3]

A careful study of the Declaration's creedal elements, however, reveals this to be a false dichotomy. A proper understanding of American identity recognizes our Republic in part as a place—a land—with a history involving a people with certain cultural habits and religious beliefs. One of the unique features of the American Founding was a set of shared truths about man, including some that the Founders took to be self-evident.

The Declaration's truths have not been obvious to everyone at every time and place. Rather, these moral and political principles are self-evident within a shared intellectual and moral context—what Thomas Jefferson called "the American Mind."[4] The Declaration's propositions about natural equality, natural rights, and the purpose of government are universally true and self-evident, but these propositions require a distinct knowledge of the terms in question and thus are self-evident only to some in practice.

Moreover, the drafters did not simply write, "These truths are self-evident." They wrote, "*We hold* these truths to be self-evident."[5] Jefferson and the others were not just asserting an abstract and isolated set of facts in the preamble. They were expressing their belief *about* and *in* those truths. The extent to which they are self-evident to us depends upon certain intellectual and moral habits, such as those that shaped the Founding generation. Once we understand the cultural soil from which these truths sprang, we can begin the more difficult but vital task of recovering the conditions that formed the American mind.

Background

The Declaration's second paragraph, or preamble, states:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among

> these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness....[6]

In his earlier draft, Jefferson had called these truths "sacred and undeniable." Benjamin Franklin appears to have replaced that phrase with "self-evident" before the draft was sent to Congress (though some scholars suggest it was Jefferson who made the change, given his education in 18th century *Port-Royal Logic*).[7] Little documentation exists for why Jefferson, Franklin, or other members of the Committee of Five made this change. As far as we know, this substitution was not contested.[8] Perhaps "self-evident" stuck because it is more persuasive.

The insertion shows that these were well-established—even if contested—principles rather than novel ones. Appeals to equality, unalienable rights, and the purpose of government had been defended from the Colonies' pulpits and in pamphlets for about a century leading up to the American Revolution.[9] The audience could be expected to grasp the self-evident truths in the Declaration's preamble. To see why these truths could be held as self-evident, however, we must look to the moral and cultural soil from which they grew. Only then can we appreciate the philosophical claim of "self-evidence."

The American Republic: People, Place, Principles

The American Republic is not just an idea. It is also a place—a land—occupied by particular people with a particular history. The American Founding appealed to universal and self-evident truths. As Jefferson argued almost half a century later, these were not novel or isolated principles. They expressed the "harmonizing sentiments of the day" and were an "expression of the American mind."[10] The American mind contained the habits and dispositions that grew out of a distinct way of life, religious beliefs, and moral norms cultivated over centuries and from which emerged the distinctive fruit of the American tree.

Americans of the colonial and Founding generations were mostly Englishmen steeped in a theistic, natural law tradition.[11] They presupposed certain truths about the world and our place in it—such as the existence of a rational and omnipotent Creator, our creation as rational image bearers of God,

original sin, and our duties to God and to the rest of creation. "[T]here became established in the minds of many Americans, elites as well as nonelites," as one scholar has summarized, "the conception of natural law to confirm their faith in the majesty of God while destroying their faith in the majesty of kings. In other words, by 1776 a great many Americans understood human government to be an outgrowth of God's natural law."[12]

Formation of the American Mind

Religious belief formed most American minds.[13] Edmund Burke noted in his 1775 "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies" that religion was a "main cause" of the "free spirit" that animated the colonists.[14] About 80 percent of the most relevant political pamphlets of the 1770s and 1780s were reprinted sermons or essays from Christian ministers.[15] As political scientist Ellis Sandoz has written:

> To permit the religious perspective concerning the rise of American nationhood to have representative expression is important because a steady attention to the pulpit from 1730 to 1805 unveils a distinctive rhetoric of political discourse: Preachers interpreted pragmatic events in terms of a political theology imbued with philosophical and revelatory learning.[16]

Although truths about equality, human nature, and the purpose of government can be understood by reason alone, religion and tradition reinforce such ideas. Moreover, it was not just religion in general, but a particular flavor of Christianity that emerged in the northern colonies that primed Americans for independence. As Burke put it, "the religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion."[17] The Puritans who migrated to the northern colonies, given their history of suppression in England, were naturally skeptical of civil authority. This spirit of liberty and dissidence was passed down through successive sects that emerged, such as Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. Moreover, the lack of spiritual hierarchy in northern colonies "reinforced the idea of absence of hierarchy in political matters."[18]

It was largely through the teachings and practices of dissident Protestantism that Americans learned these truths, as popular writings and sermons of the day reveal. George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights and later the Declaration of Independence resemble the ideas expressed in early pamphlets and sermons that forged American independence.

The Declaration's Truths in Context

Created Equal. An examination of colonial sermons sheds light on the intellectual and theological context in which the Declaration's claims to human equality and natural rights were broadly understood. Puritan pastors like John Wise, for example, who has been called the "prophet of American Democracy,"[19] preached about God's providence and the laws of nature laying the foundation for just government. Wise wrote in 1717 that "every man must be acknowledged equal to every man" and that it thus "follows as a command of the law of nature, that every man esteem and treat another as one who is naturally his equal, or who is a man as well as he." According to Wise, "The end of all good government is to cultivate humanity, and promote the happiness of all, and the good of every man in all his rights, his life, liberty, estate, honor, etc., without injury or abuse done to any."[20]

Samuel Sherwood's "Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers," among the most famous Revolutionary War sermons, articulated a Christian anthropology that grounded colonial appeals to human equality:

> [God] has made mankind rational creatures; and left them to choose that which they apprehend to be most perfect in its nature and kind, and best suited to their state, situation and circumstances. The divine constitution, and government of God over his intelligent creatures, is fixed; and it does not become men to exercise their invention or wisdom in seeking any alteration or change in it.[21]

Such sermons are in striking continuity with the classical understanding of man as a rational animal, endowed with an intellect and a will. We are equal insofar as we share a "human nature." By virtue of our humanity, we are "free" in the sense that, once our faculty of reason is ripe, we can act deliberately rather than by mere instinct, passion, or the laws of physics. John Adams put it thus: "By the law of nature, all men are men, and not angels—men, and not lions—men, and not whales—men, and not eagles—that is, they are all of the same species; and this is the most that the equality of nature amounts to."[22]

Congregational minister Elisha Williams, a legislator and rector of Yale College, said in 1744 that "reason teaches us that all men are naturally equal in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another." He continued: "For God having given man an understanding to direct his actions, has given him therewith a freedom of will and liberty of acting, as properly belonging

thereto, within the bounds of that law he is under...."[23] Neither pastors nor the American Founders taught that we should be free to act simply as we please. We are bound by a moral law even in a state of nature. Our freedom consists of the ability to discern right from wrong and to act accordingly. The Founders and their contemporaries thereby distinguished between liberty and licentiousness: True liberty is acting in accord with right reason, while licentiousness is acting simply by passion.

Natural Rights. Just as we can discern certain duties by nature, we derive corresponding rights. The most basic of duties—so basic that it is a natural instinct—is self-preservation. Just as every man has the duty to respect and preserve his life, so too does he have the duty to respect the lives of others. This basic duty of self-preservation translates into a rights claim: I have the right to my life, and others have a duty to respect that (and vice versa).

This correspondence between right and duty translates to several other natural rights as well. As Elisha Williams said: "reason tells us, all are born thus naturally equal, i.e. with an equal right to their persons; so also with an *equal right to their preservation; and therefore to such things as nature affords for their subsistence*."[24] The right to life is intrinsically tied to the rights of liberty and property.

Baptist minister Isaac Backus characterized the principle that "*no man can give that which is another's*" as a maxim "which carries it's [*sic*] own evidence with it."[25] Another pamphleteer, writing under the pseudonym "A Moderate Whig," described the rights to self-preservation and defense as truths of "self-evidencing clearness." Such principles, according to the author, were "scarcely capable of any farther elucidation than what is offered to the rational understanding by its simple proposition, as first principles can hardly be proven."[26] Moses Mather was just as emphatic: "[I]t is evident, that man hath the clearest right, by the most indefeasible title, to personal security, liberty, and private property.... And, upon this principle, an offensive war may sometimes be justifiable, viz. when it is necessary for preservation and defence."[27]

The pursuit of happiness has perhaps stirred up the most controversy among the rights listed in the Declaration. Much of this controversy arises from a modern tendency to define happiness as mere pleasure. In the Declaration, as in colonial and Founding-era thought, however, the happiness being pursued refers to man's highest end. English jurist William Blackstone, a key influence on the Founders, summarized God's paternal precept for mankind: "that man should pursue his own true and substantial happiness."[28] American Founder James Wilson, one of only six men to sign

both the Declaration and the Constitution, similarly said that God's one paternal command could be summed up as "let man pursue his own perfection and happiness."[29] The notions of human "fulfillment" or "flourishing" capture how Wilson and the other Founders understood such "perfection and happiness."

These ideas, far from being modern or "Enlightenment" inventions, reflect an intellectual lineage tracing to Aristotle, Cicero, and Aquinas,[30] and they find expression in the common-sense realism of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid and in such influential English thinkers as Algernon Sidney and Richard Hooker.[31] In this tradition, happiness is understood as a fulfillment of our nature: that is, the end (*telos*) of human life. Earthly happiness requires some degree of material prosperity as well as moral excellence or virtue. As George Washington emphasized in his First Inaugural, "there is no truth more thoroughly established, than that there exists in the oeconomy [*sic*] and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness...."[32] John Adams similarly said that "[a]ll sober enquiries after truth...have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity consists in virtue."[33]

The End of Government. Just as the end of man is his happiness or fulfillment (as defined above), the end of government is the happiness or fulfillment of the whole of society.[34] As John Wise stated, "*Salus Populi*, or the happiness of the people is the end of its being, or main business to be attended and done."[35] Society forms from a distinctly human inclination (as rational and social creatures). While not all will achieve happiness, civil society is the best way for us to secure its natural preconditions, including security and material prosperity.

In 1730, Congregationalist minister Benjamin Colman delivered a sermon, subsequently printed for colonists of Boston, in which he declared that "as more proper to the present order and happiness of mankind, [God] has appointed the government of men to be by men. So the peace, tranquility and flourishing of places are made to depend on the wisdom and fidelity of their rulers, in the good administration of the government."[36]

This is not to say that the Founders and their colonial predecessors held a utopian view of society or of human nature. They held a sober view of human nature that was informed by the Christian doctrine of original sin. We are capable of virtue but are still inclined toward vice. As Samuel Sherwood put it, "Error and imperfection belongs to every individual of the human race."[37] For this reason, we need government to keep us in check. "If men were angels," as *Federalist* No. 51 famously argued, "no government would be necessary."[38] At the same time, government is composed of men,

so there must be checks upon it as well. Moreover, given our fallenness and basic equality, no one human is qualified to exercise absolute power over others without their consent.[39]

American colonists well understood this basic principle of popular consent. As early as 1638, 50 years before Locke published his famous *Two Treatises of Government*, Rev. Thomas Hooker of Connecticut said in a sermon before the General Court that "[t]he foundation of authority is laid in the free consent of the people," and "the choice of public magistrates belongs to the people by God's own allowance."[40]

Right of Rebellion. Ultimately, the purpose of government is to secure the peace and tranquility—in a word, happiness—of its citizens, but government, if left unchecked, can devolve into anarchy or tyranny and fail to fulfill its primary end. Rebellion is warranted for sufficiently grave reasons. Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, one of the most influential ministers to pave the way for independence, made the biblical case for resisting unjust government in his 1750 sermon "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers,"[41] which John Adams admired as "the spark that ignited the American Revolution."[42] Mayhew interpreted colonial experience in light of Romans 13, in which St. Paul wrote, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.... Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur condemnation."

At first, the passage seems to forbid rebellion against any government. However, Mayhew argued that St. Paul was referring to righteous government, whose rulers, as the apostle writes, "are not a terror to good works, but to the evil." A primary end of government is to "punish evil doers," as Mayhew says, and defend the innocent. But if rulers are "partial in their administration of justice" and the innocent fear punishment as much as the guilty, then "the main end of civil government will be frustrated." Thus, Mayhew asks, "what reason is there for submitting to that government, which does by no means answer the design of government?"[43] Christians cannot in good faith obey a government if its commands are at odds with God's higher law.

Mayhew and other patriotic ministers took this logic a step further: Not only are we not obliged to obey an unjust government—we also have a duty to resist it. "To love ourselves, and truly to seek our own welfare, is both our liberty and our indispensible duty," said Isaac Backus in 1773.[44] The Suffolk Resolves, passed the next year in opposition to Britain's "Intolerable Acts," similarly invoked the duty to resist tyranny that stems from the

"indispensable Duty which we owe to GOD, our Country, Ourselves and Posterity...."[45]

Mayhew's revolutionary reading of Romans 13 reflected a modern development in Christian teaching, though it was not unprecedented.[46] The explicit right to revolution emerged around the 16th century. Spanish Jesuits articulated a theory of resistance that built upon earlier teachings concerning just law and just war. Notably, Francisco Suárez argued that political authority ultimately resides in the community even when that authority is transferred to a ruler or ruling body. The community therefore retains a right, in sufficiently grave circumstances, to resist a tyrant.[47] A parallel theory of resistance also developed within the Calvinist tradition, most notably with the 1579 publication of *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (*A Defence of Liberty Against Tyrants*).[48]

A key caveat is that revolution is a grave matter. As the Declaration notes, "governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes." Accordingly, resistance to tyranny—like just war—requires proper authority, just cause, and right intention and must be undertaken only as a last resort with reasonable probability of success and proportionate outcome.[49] These are matters of prudence, and some of the Founders, like John Dickinson, opposed revolution against Britain on such grounds.

Understanding "Self-Evidence" in the Declaration

The beliefs described above are not mere backstory to the American Founding. Jefferson and the Committee of Five channeled these beliefs into the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's appeals to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" and subsequent truths about natural equality, natural rights, and the purpose of government were not isolated propositions. They expressed a shared moral and political vision.

By "self-evident," the Founders did not mean that these truths were obvious to everyone. Rather, these truths are self-evident at least to some: namely, to those with the proper moral and intellectual cultivation to guide natural reason. To sincerely claim that these truths are self-evident, however, one must be able to *hold* them as such. The Founders were stating a special form of what modern analytic philosophers refer to as a "propositional attitude statement."[50]

Jefferson did not write the isolated proposition, "All men are created equal." Nor did he write, "We believe everyone has the right to life" as if he were stating a particular cultural preference. Nor did he state that men have a right to life, liberty, and so forth. Nor did he write, "These truths are

self-evident." He wrote, and the Founders signed, a collective propositional attitude statement that takes the form of a creed. He wrote, "*We hold* these truths to be self-evident." Jefferson and the men who signed the Declaration were *professing a belief in truths that they took to be self-evident*. Moreover, given the circumstances in which the Declaration was signed, the Founders staked their lives on these truths.

Many 18th century English thinkers in the vein of John Locke understood self-evident propositions to be fundamental premises in a syllogism, roughly equivalent to axioms in mathematics. Logician William Duncan, who taught Jefferson's teacher William Small, followed Locke in arguing that the subject and predicate of a self-evident proposition must be identical: They must bear the evidence for their truth in themselves.[51] This understanding of self-evidence is akin to what philosophers later termed "analytically true" propositions—those that are true by virtue of the meanings of the words alone.[52] For instance, the statement that "a bachelor is an unmarried man of marriageable age" is analytically true, or self-evident, once one knows what "bachelor" means.

The truths listed in the second paragraph of the Declaration do not neatly fit this definition. As scholar Michael Zuckert points out, the statement that "all men are created equal" depends on intervening ideas about the existence of a God who created the world and humankind in a certain way.[53] Because Zuckert limits self-evident propositions to tautological statements, he argues that what the Founders meant is that we should hold these truths "as if" they are self-evident. Zuckert concludes that the truths of the Declaration are only "functionally and politically" self-evident rather than strictly so.

Zuckert is correct that the holding of these truths by Americans as a people is significant. Indeed, this creedal statement may have constituted the colonists into one people distinct from the British—though it no more exhausts the meaning of America than the Apostles' Creed exhausts the life of the Christian. In any case, the problem with Zuckert's proposed solution is that the drafters did not write "We hold (or should hold) these truths 'as if' they are self-evident." They wrote that they held "these truths *to be* self-evident."[54]

A Broader Account

Locke's empiricism leads to a narrow interpretation of self-evidence. If one insists upon his definition and imputes it to the Declaration's drafters, then it is hard to say how the truths are self-evident in the strict sense. But this was not the only definition of self-evidence on offer. Jefferson was influenced by Locke, but also by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like

Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, and Thomas Reid.[55] The Scottish school developed the notion of "moral" or "common sense"—a human faculty or instinct by which we grasp basic principles of right and wrong. Locke, by contrast, believed the mind was a blank slate and we grasp self-evidence only through agreement of things external to the self.[56]

We can also consider scholastic understandings of self-evidence which were transmitted, at least indirectly, into Founding political philosophy.[57] According to Thomas Aquinas, for a statement "to be self-evident [*per se nota*], its predicate is contained in the notion of the subject."[58] There must be an essential or necessary correspondence between terms.[59] The terms in "all men are created equal" are essentially connected insofar as all men share a human nature (for example, man is, as Aristotle and Aquinas maintained, a rational animal). Similarly, once we know what government is, then its purpose (to secure happiness rightly defined) is evident.

Moreover, contrary to common assumption, not all self-evident truths are evident to everyone. As Aquinas saw it, among self-evident truths, some are evident to everyone (*per se nota omnibus*), while others are known only to some (*per se nota quoad nos*).[60] Philosopher Christopher Kaczor observes that in the Declaration of Independence, "'we hold' in English might be understood as making a similar qualification to the claim of self-evidence as *quoad nos* [evident only to some] does in Latin."[61]

Self-evident propositions knowable only to some require an "intellectual habituation" by which one grasps the terms or concepts in question. Aquinas believed that all humans have natural habits to grasp first principles. In the realm of moral reasoning, this habit is *synderesis*: the "habitual capacity possessed by man to discern immediately, from certain general, moral principles."[62] To apply *synderesis* correctly, however, our consciences must be properly formed. This requires the virtue of prudence.

As Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid later argued, some truths are self-evident only to those whose "understanding and moral faculty are ripe."[63] Ethical and political principles often demand special cultivation to be grasped as self-evident because, as Aristotle noted, different domains of knowledge have different levels of precision. "[T]he demands made of given arguments should accord with the subject matter in question," and matters of conduct cannot be ordered by simple axioms.[64] Alexander Hamilton similarly said in *Federalist* No. 31 that "it cannot be pretended that the principles of moral and political knowledge have the same degree of certainty with those of mathematics...."[65] Yet the obscurity of moral and political truths "is much oftener in the passions and prejudices of the reasoner than in the subject."

For this reason, we must be formed morally and intellectually to grasp the true principles of politics and morality, as these subjects do not have the same degree of certainty that, for example, geometry or chemistry has. The truths of the Declaration fall under this category. They are in principle discernible by the natural faculty of reason, but they are not obvious to everyone. Rather, they are clear to those of sufficient education and moral formation. Jefferson then set forth widely shared truths in that second paragraph, allowing Americans to see these propositions as necessarily related.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the American Mind

The very fact that so many Americans no longer see the truths of the Declaration as self-evident is a sign of our civilizational crisis. The Declaration's self-evident truths are moral affirmations rooted in a shared vision of God, human nature, and political purpose. Early Americans did not simply assent to notions of human equality, rights, and just government. They imbibed and lived these truths. As President Calvin Coolidge put it, "These great truths were in the air that our people breathed."[66]

If we want our Republic to last for the next 250 years, we must revive the moral and cultural conditions that make these truths evident once again. We of course need to correct the prevailing tendencies of relativism and positivism that have captured our institutions and popular imagination, but the solution requires more than simply teaching certain ideas and uprooting others. After all, the Founders did not just believe that truths about God, human nature, and the purpose of government were self-evident; they also believed *in* them—so much so that they risked their lives to defend them.

To revive the American mind and heart, we must restore the sources of moral unity and prosperity. As George Washington said in his Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports." The health of our religious and virtue-forming institutions must therefore become a central concern of public life. Moral formation begins in the family but is sustained and reinforced in schools, churches, and civic associations that cultivate shared habits and loyalties.

Education plays a crucial role in this process. Reviving liberal education, properly understood, is essential. It was this form of education that shaped the Founding generation, drawing from the Western canon that originated in Athens and Rome, and was taken up into a larger synthesis in Christian theology, history, and practice. Such education does not merely transmit information or skills; it habituates students in first principles and helps to

form the moral and civic virtues that are necessary for self-government. In particular, we must restore virtues associated with love of country—gratitude, duty, and responsibility. Such civic and educational renewal, in turn, means restoring the free exercise of religion in place of the multicultural relativism and secularism that currently guards the borders of the public square.

Our Republic, to paraphrase John Adams, is one for a moral and religious people, which in turn forged our Constitution and our Founding creed. The critical question in 2026 is this: Are we still the same people for whom it was made?

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Endnotes

1. J. P. Zmirak, "America the Abstraction," *The American Conservative*, January 13, 2003, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/america-the-abstraction (accessed February 26, 2026).
2. For a recent defense of the creedal notion, see Gordon S. Wood, "Why America Is a 'Creedal Nation,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/opinion/why-america-is-a-creedal-nation-75676aa8?gaa (accessed February 26, 2026); John Laughland, "Nation Building: Why Bombs Don't Make Democracies," *The American Conservative*, June 2, 2003, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/nation-building/ (accessed February 26, 2026).
3. News release, "Nationhood Lab Unveils Research Report on 'The Story of America,'" Salve Regina University, March 13, 2025, https://salve.edu/news/news-listing/nationhood-lab-unveils-research-report-story-america (accessed February 28, 2026). The study assumes a creed vs. culture framing, reporting that 63 percent of Americans preferred the statement that we are united "not by a shared religion or ancestry or history, but by our shared commitment to a set of American founding ideals," while 33 percent agreed more with the claim that Americans are united "by shared history, traditions, and values and by our fortitude and character as Americans…."
4. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5212 (accessed February 28, 2026).
5. Emphasis added.
6. "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, America's Founding Documents, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript (accessed February 27, 2026).
7. See Wilbur Samuel Howell, "The Declaration of Independence and Eighteenth-Century Logic," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (October 1961), pp. 463–484, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1921097 (accessed February 26, 2026).
8. Robert Curry, "Jefferson, Locke, and the Declaration of Independence," *Claremont Review of Books*, March 17, 2017, https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/jefferson-locke-and-the-declaration-of-independence/ (accessed February 26, 2026). As Curry puts it, "To my knowledge, none of the signers, many of whom knew Locke's writings as well as Jefferson did, objected that the use of 'self-evident' in the Declaration was a violation of Lockean thinking. And, over the course of making more than 80 amendments to Jefferson's original draft, they had ample opportunity *to* object. This dog that didn't bark argues that neither Jefferson nor the Declaration's other signers relied on Locke's definition of 'self-evident.'" See also Charles Kesler, "Editing the Declaration," in *Natural Rights, the Common Good, and the American Revolution*, ed. Yuval Levin, Adam White, and John Yoo (Washington: AEI Press, 2025), pp. 19–41, https://america250.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Natural-Rights-the-Common-Good-and-the-American-Revolution.pdf (accessed February 28, 2026).
9. See Albert J. Beveridge, "Sources of the Declaration of Independence," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1926), pp. 289–315, https://journals.psu.edu/pmhb/article/view/28081/27837 (accessed February 26, 2026). According to Beveridge, "The Declaration of Rights adopted by Congress October 14, 1774, contained all the ideas set out in the Declaration of Independence. Moreover those ideas had been uttered thousands of times throughout the Colonies for decades before the Revolution. Far more important, the people had lived those ideas…. But Jefferson gave final expression to the general American thought and feeling which had been growing for more than a hundred years…." Ibid., p. 299.
10. Jefferson, letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825.
11. Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer, *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
12. Derek H. Davis, "Religious Dimensions of the Declaration of Independence: Fact and Fiction," *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1994), p. 477, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/36.3.469 (accessed February 27, 2026).
13. Newspapers and pamphlets were also crucial sources of revolutionary ideas, but they were more limited in reach compared to the pulpit. Studies show that only about a quarter of Philadelphia households had access to a newspaper in 1773, and this number was lower in most of America generally. By contrast, nearly every New Englander attended church and heard about 15,000 hours of sermons in a lifetime. See Michael W. McConnell, "Religion and Republicanism in the American Revolution," in *Religion and the American Revolution*, ed. Yuval Levin, Adam J. White, and John Yoo (Washington: AEI Press, 2025), pp. 5–23, https://america250.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/9780844750880-text.pdf (accessed February 28, 2026).
14. Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," March 22, 1775, *The Founders' Constitution*, University of Chicago Press, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch1s2.html (accessed February 27, 2026).
15. Glenn A. Moots, "Early America's Political Pulpit," *Law & Liberty*, December 28, 2021, https://lawliberty.org/classic/early-americas-political-pulpit/ (accessed February 27, 2026).
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21. Samuel Sherwood, "Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers" (New Haven, 1774), in *Political Sermons*, p. 382.
22. Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, February 4, 1794, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-10-02-0030 (accessed February 28, 2026).
23. Elisha Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants" (Boston, 1744), in *Political Sermons*, p. 56.
24. Ibid. Emphasis added.
25. Isaac Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty," (Boston, 1773), in *Political Sermons*, p. 366. Emphasis in original.
26. A Moderate Whig [Steven Case?], "Defensive Arms Vindicated" (New Marlborough, 1783), in *Political Sermons*, p. 719.
27. Moses Mather, "America's Appeal to the Impartial World" (Hartford, 1775), in *Political Sermons*, p. 445.
28. Sir William Blackstone, "Of the Nature of Laws in General," in *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1893), Vol. 1, p. 40, https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2140/Blackstone_1387-01_Bk.pdf (accessed March 2, 2026).
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30. Gregory R. Johnson, "The First Founding Father: Aristotle on Freedom and Popular Government," in *Liberty and Democracy*, ed. Tibor R. Machan (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), pp. 29–59, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/0817929223_29.pdf (accessed March 2, 2026); James J. Walsh, "Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (July 1932), pp. 483–507, https://dn720006.ca.archive.org/0/items/sim_new-england-quarterly_1932-07_5_3/sim_new-england-quarterly_1932-07_5_3.pdf (accessed March 2, 2026); Gordon S. Wood, "Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution," *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (April 1990), pp. 13–38, https://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2785&context=cklawreview (accessed March 2, 2026).
31. See Robert R. Reilly, *America on Trial: A Defense of the Founding* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020).
32. George Washington, "First Inaugural Address: Final Version," April 30, 1789, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-02-02-0130-0003 (accessed March 2, 2026).
33. John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," April 1776, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0004 (accessed March 2, 2026).
34. As John Adams observed, "We ought to consider, what is the end of government, before we determine which is the best form. Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree, that *the happiness of society is the end of government*, as all Divines and moral Philosophers will agree that *the happiness of the individual is the end of man*. From this principle it will follow, that the form of government, which communicates ease, comfort, security, or in one word happiness to the greatest number of persons, and in the greatest degree, is the best." Ibid. Emphasis added.
35. Wise, *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*, p. 40.
36. Benjamin Colman, "Government the Pillar of the Earth," A Sermon Preached at the Lecture in Boston, Before His Excellency Jonathan Belcher, Esq., Captain General and Commander in Chief, & etc., August 13, 1730 (Boston: Printed for T. Hancock, at the Bible and Three Crowns near the Town-Dock, 1730), https://www.belcherfoundation.org/pillar.htm (accessed February 27, 2026).
37. Sherwood, "Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers," in *Political Sermons*, p. 382.
38. James Madison or Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 51, February 6, 1788, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0199 (accessed February 27, 2026).
39. "A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions." Ibid.
40. Based on Douglas H. Shepard's transcription, "The Wolcott Shorthand Notebook Transcribed" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1957), cited in Michael Besso, "Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal,* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2012), p. 200, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/eam.2012.0002 (accessed March 2, 2026).
41. Jonathan Mayhew, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers," December 31, 1750, Ashbrook Center at Ashland University, Teaching American History, https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/discourse-concerning-unlimited-submission-and-non-resistance-to-the-higher-powers/ (accessed February 27, 2026).

42. Quoted in Kegan Foley, "Jonathan Mayhew," West End Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, https://thewestendmuseum.org/history/era/new-fields/jonathan-mayhew/ (accessed March 3, 2026), and Gary M. Calles, "Jonathan Mayhew: America's First Revolutionary Preacher-Patriot," Foundation for Economic Education, February 5, 2019, https://fee.org/articles/jonathan-mayhew-america-s-first-revolutionary-preacher-patriot/ (accessed March 3, 2026).
43. Mayhew, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers."
44. Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty," in *Political Sermons*, p. 332.
45. *Massachusetts-Gazette*, "Suffolk Resolves (September 15, 1774)," Virginia Humanities, *Encyclopedia Virginia*, https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/suffolk-resolves-september-15-1774/ (accessed March 2, 2026).
46. "[T]he clergy who supported resistance did so in ways that were consistent with their own theological tradition." Gary L. Steward, *Justifying Revolution: The American Clergy's Argument for Political Resistance, 1750–1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 2.
47. Sidney Penner, "Francisco Suárez (1548–1617)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/suarez/ (accessed March 2, 2026); Francisco Suarez, S.J., *Defense of the Catholic and Apostolic Faith Against the Errors of Anglicanism*, trans. Peter L.P. Simpson, 6.4, pp. 929–939, https://www.aristotelophile.com/Books/Translations/Suarez%20Defense%20Whole.pdf (accessed March 2, 2026).
48. Hubert Languet, *A Defence of Liberty Against Tyrants: A Translation of the Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos by Junius Brutus*, hist. intro. Harold J. Laski (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1924), https://archive.org/details/defenceofliberty0000lang/page/n5/mode/2up (accessed February 28, 2026).
49. Alexander Moseley, "Just War Theory," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/justwar/ (accessed March 2, 2026).
50. An ordinary proposition is simply a claim that a certain state of affairs obtains, such as "It's raining outside right now." Let us call that proposition R. A propositional attitude statement may presuppose the truth of R, but rather than stating R directly, it refers to one's thought or belief concerning R. "I believe R" and "I think R is true" would be propositional attitude statements. See Michael Nelson, "Propositional Attitude Reports," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prop-attitude-reports/ (accessed March 2, 2026).
51. Howell, "The Declaration of Independence and Eighteenth-Century Logic."
52. Christopher Kaczor, "The Declaration of Independence: Inalienable Rights, the Creator, and the Political Order," *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2023), p. 251, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1341&context=phil_fac (accessed February 27, 2026).
53. Michael P. Zuckert, "Self-Evident Truth and the Declaration of Independence," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1987), pp. 319–339, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1407839 (accessed March 2, 2026). Zuckert notes a further difficulty when we consider the grammatical structure of the sentence as a whole. The truths appear in three sets, each of which is said to be self-evident: first, that all men are created equal and endowed with certain rights; second, that governments are instituted to secure these rights; and third, that the people have the right to alter or abolish their government if it becomes destructive of these ends and to lay new foundations that would best secure their rights and liberties. The second set seems to follow from the first and the third from the second. The problem, as Zuckert notes, is that not all of these sets can be self-evident if they derive their truth from a prior premise.
54. Emphasis added.
55. Allen Jayne, "Self-Evident Truths," in *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy, and Theology* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jgjm.10 (accessed March 2, 2026); Jayne, "Kames and the Moral Sense," in *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*; Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985).
56. See Nathan Rockwood, "Locke: Epistemology," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/locke-ep/ (accessed March 2, 2026).
57. Robert Curry, "Educating the Founders," *The American Mind*, February 2, 2023, https://americanmind.org/salvo/educating-the-founders/ (accessed March 2, 2026); Daniel N. Robinson, "James Wilson and Natural Rights Constitutionalism: The Influence of the Scottish Enlightenment," The Witherspoon Institute, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism: American Founding and Constitutionalism," 2011, https://www.nlnrac.org/american/scottish-enlightenment.html (accessed March 2, 2026).
58. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 94, Art. 2, New Advent, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2094.htm (accessed March 2, 2026). See also *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 2, Art. 1, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm#article1 (accessed March 2, 2026): "A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject."
59. "*Man is rational*...is necessarily true because 'man' and 'rational' signify differing concepts of what is one in reality. The unity of the thing signified by the terms of a proposition grounds this proposition's necessary truth," Gloria Frost, "Thomas Aquinas on the Perpetual Truth of Essential Propositions," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 2010), p. 208, https://philpapers.org/archive/FROTAO-2.pdf (accessed March 2, 2026). Emphasis in original.
60. St. Thomas's broader classification is between those truths simply evident in themselves (not to us) and those that are evident to us (and in themselves). "A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us.... If, therefore the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like." *Summa Theologiae,* I, Q. 2, Art. 1.
61. Kaczor, "The Declaration of Independence: Inalienable Rights, the Creator, and the Political Order," p. 251.

62. R. A. Armstrong, "An Examination of the Concept of 'Self-Evidence' in Thomistic Natural Law Teaching," in *Primary and Secondary Precepts in Thomistic Natural Law Teaching* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 1966), p. 25.
63. Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1852), p. 480, https://dn790002.ca.archive.org/0/items/worksofthomasrei00reiduoft/worksofthomasrei00reiduoft.pdf (accessed February 27, 2026).
64. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Book 2, p. 28, 1104a, https://ia902300.us.archive.org/28/items/aristotle-entire-collected-writings/Aristotle/Nicomachean%20Ethics%20%5Btrans.%20Bartlett%20%26%20Collins%5D/Aristotle%20-%20Nicomachean%20Ethics%20%28Chicago%2C%202011%29.pdf (accessed February 27, 2026). See also Kaczor, "The Declaration of Independence: Inalienable Rights, the Creator, and the Political Order."
65. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 31, January 1, 1788, National Archives, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0188 (accessed February 27, 2026).
66. Calvin Coolidge, Speech on the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 5, 1926, National Constitution Center, https://constitutioncenter.org/declaration/primary-sources/speech-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-declaration-of-independence (accessed February 27, 2026).