

# Renewing the American Covenant

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Students increasingly are miseducated, indoctrinated to view their country's history through a Marxist lens that distorts it beyond recognition.

It is incumbent on conservatives to resist threats to the American project from both the Left and the Right by recommitting themselves to our Founding principles.

Conservatism in the American context means preserving the Spirit of Philadelphia, which was born of the great encounter between Athens and Jerusalem.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, a small band of patriots did something unprecedented. In Lincoln's immortal words, they "brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."<sup>1</sup> The theme of this year's Conservative Vision of Education Conference is "Renewing American History and Civics Education" because the survival of the Republic those men built depends on whether each generation understands and embraces the principles that gave it life.

As the Phoenix Declaration recognizes, "A republic depends upon an educated and patriotic citizenry."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the evidence that we are failing at this task is stark. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 13 percent of American eighth-graders scored at or above proficiency in U.S. history, and only 22 percent in civics. Four in 10 fell

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below the basic level in history. The Annenberg Public Policy Center has found that, in some recent years, fewer than half of American adults could name all three branches of government.<sup>3</sup>

These are not merely disappointing numbers. They represent a civilizational crisis. As Thomas Jefferson warned: “[I]f a nation expects to be ignorant & free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was & never will be.”<sup>4</sup>

## “So Much That Isn’t So”

But the problem is not only that our students are learning too little. It is also that left-wing activists have infiltrated the classroom, and they, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, are teaching children “so much that isn’t so.”<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, students are not merely uninstructed in the American Founding—they are miseducated, indoctrinated to view their country’s history through a Marxist lens that distorts it beyond recognition.

Conservatives, including many in this room, were prescient about the dangers of critical race theory and its offspring, most notoriously the 1619 Project. We understood early what these movements represented: a radical effort to undermine our constitutional Republic by smearing its Founders and their ideas as irredeemably racist. We stood athwart revisionist history yelling, “Stop!”

Critical race theorists hold that American institutions are and always have been instruments of racial oppression. The 1619 Project advanced the claim that the true Founding of America was not 1776 but 1619, when the first slaves arrived, and that preserving slavery was a principal motive of the American Revolution.

These narratives strike at the heart of the American project. If the Founding was not about liberty but about oppression, if the self-evident truths were merely a smokescreen for exploitation, then there is nothing to conserve and nothing to teach our children except grievance and guilt. Progress, in their view, requires scrapping the Declaration and the Constitution and starting from scratch.

But that is not progress. A century ago, President Calvin Coolidge addressed the nation from Philadelphia to mark the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. His words are worth quoting at length:

About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful. It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great

advance over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction can not lay claim to progress. They are reactionary. Their ideas are not more modern, but more ancient, than those of the Revolutionary fathers.<sup>6</sup>

If conservatism in the American context means anything, it means preserving the Spirit of Philadelphia, which was born of the great encounter between Athens and Jerusalem.

## Undoing the Founding: Threats from Left and Right

Now, conservatives have been right to chastise liberals for failing to rein in the far Left, which seeks to undo the Founding, but intellectual honesty compels us to acknowledge that the threat to America's Founding principles is not confined to one side. We are witnessing the rise of a radical "New Right," which also seeks to undermine our Founding ideals and replace them with something alien.

In a recent article, one such writer denigrated the concepts of "free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, [and] traditional American values" and even derided our Founding documents themselves, calling the Declaration merely "an ordinance of secession from the British Empire" and the Constitution "an old list of laws and political compromises," concluding that adhering to their principles in today's political environment is "akin to running into a fire to grab a drawer full of old legal documents."<sup>7</sup>

Instead of a conservatism rooted in ordered liberty, limited government, and the equal dignity of all mankind, various factions on the Right are pushing for throne-and-altar or blood-and-soil ideologies fundamentally foreign to the American tradition.

Ideas have consequences. Consider the demons that critical race theory has unleashed. Young white men are told by their teachers, by TikTok influencers, and by college orientation programs that their skin color is their defining feature—and that they have the wrong one. Their

white skin makes them “oppressors.” They must check their privilege and feel guilt for their whiteness. Eventually, they encounter someone who tells them that their teachers were *half* right: their skin color is indeed their defining characteristic, they say, but they are the *right* color. This message can feel liberating, exhilarating, even intoxicating. By embracing white supremacy, they think they are doing the opposite of critical race theory, but it is really just the flip-side of the coin. Both sides share the same poisonous premise: that human beings are defined not by the content of their character but by the color of their skin. The true opposite is the Judeo-Christian conviction enshrined in our Declaration—that all men are created equal in the image of their Creator, endowed with a dignity no ideology can revoke.

### “A Tradition That Is Worth Passing On”

A nation that cannot control its borders is not a nation. A political movement that cannot control its ideological borders is not a political movement. It is incumbent upon conservatives to stand athwart the threats to the American project from both the Left and especially the Right. And the way we do it is by recommitting ourselves to the Founding principles. As the Phoenix Declaration proclaims, we must ensure that students “develop a deep understanding of and respect for our nation’s founding documents and the ideas they contain about ordered liberty, justice, the rule of law, limited government, natural rights, and the equal dignity of all human beings.” We must ensure that students “learn the whole truth about America—its merits and failings—without obscuring that America is a great source of good in the world and that we have a tradition that is worth passing on.”<sup>8</sup>

That is what this conference is about. That is what this semiquincentennial year demands—a renewal of the American covenant. So let me close with Coolidge’s closing words in July of 1926, which ring even more true today than when he first uttered them. After reflecting on the central influence of Scripture on the minds of the Founders, Coolidge observed:

We live in an age of science and of abounding accumulation of material things. These did not create our Declaration. Our Declaration created them. The things of the spirit come first.... If we are to maintain the great heritage which has been bequeathed to us, we must be like-minded as the fathers who created it.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

America's future depends on our commitment to the biblically based Founding principles which made America great. America at its best is rightly called a beacon of freedom, a shining city on a hill, the last best hope of Earth. Let us, in this 250th year of our independence, rededicate ourselves—with undiminished devotion—to its defense. Thank you, and God bless America.

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## Endnotes

1. Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, National Constitution Center, [https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/abraham-lincoln-the-gettysburg-address-1863?gad\\_source=1](https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/abraham-lincoln-the-gettysburg-address-1863?gad_source=1) (accessed April 14, 2026).
2. The Heritage Foundation, "The Phoenix Declaration," <https://www.heritage.org/phoenix-declaration>.
3. University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center, "A Majority of Americans Can't Recall Most First Amendment Rights," posted September 12, 2024, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/most-americans-cant-recall-most-first-amendment-rights/> (accessed April 14, 2026).
4. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816, National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0209> (accessed April 14, 2026).
5. Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," speech delivered on national television, October 27, 1964, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964> (accessed April 15, 2026).
6. Calvin Coolidge, "The Inspiration of the Declaration," speech celebrating the 150th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 5, 1926, <https://coolidgefoundation.org/resources/inspiration-of-the-declaration-of-independence/> (accessed April 14, 2026).
7. Quoted in Dan Hannan, "The Kids Are Alt-Right," *The Washington Examiner*, February 6, 2026, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/premium/4448077/the-kids-are-alt-right/> (accessed April 14, 2026).
8. The Heritage Foundation, "The Phoenix Declaration."
9. Coolidge, "The Inspiration of the Declaration."