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People, Place, Principles: Capturing the Meaning of American Heritage and Citizenship

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America faces a decline in patriotism, chaos in mass immigration, the lack of assimilation of hostile enclaves, and the return of racial identity politics. The creedal reading of America, amplified during the Cold War as an ideological counter to Soviet universalism, now contends with a culturalist reaction born from the catastrophic failures of nation-preserving at home and nation-building abroad. We should reject the false dilemma that pits the American creed against American culture. Rightly framed, they are partners in the same story. To capture and preserve the meaning of American citizenship and of our American heritage for the next 250 years, we should work to preserve the people, the place, and the principles that together form an indivisible whole.

I. Introduction: The Creed vs. Culture Debate

"Our nation is not founded on a religion. It's not based on a common culture, even, or heritage.... We're a creedal nation."[1] With those words in an interview with *Reason*'s Nick Gillespie, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch reignited a long-running argument about American identity. The short clip of Gorsuch's quote soon lit up X with some defending and others criticizing Gorsuch's formulation, and the fire burned for days.

Among critics, for instance, Christopher Rufo argued that principles cannot float free of the culture that birthed them.[2] Others circulated a vintage clip of the late Justice Antonin Scalia. A Catholic of Italian descent, Scalia made the culturalist case with characteristic bluntness: America *does* have a distinct culture descended from British (and mostly Protestant) colonies. To pretend otherwise is dangerous.[3]

The exchanges between the "creedalists" and "culturalists" were polarized and, as social media arguments tend to be, cartoonish. Both sides landed blows, but both also often missed their target for a simple reason: Pitting creed against culture sets up a false dilemma.

Justice Gorsuch is right to argue that America was constituted by explicit moral commitments rather than mere geography, ethnic kinship, or dynastic accident.[4] His critics are right to argue that the American creed, such as it is, did not drop from the sky; it is the fruit of a specific culture—the Christian West—and the specific inheritance of the British settlers who founded America. Some American colonists even saw their passage to the New World in terms of a covenant much like the biblical exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt into the promised land.

If we strip the creed from that culture, it becomes like seeds thrown on hard, dry soil: It cannot take root. Recall, for instance, the democracy-supporting debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Strip the culture from the creed, on the other hand, and we lose the moral leverage that allowed our predecessors to condemn slavery and segregation.

In 2026, the creed vs. culture debate is animated by deeper questions of personal and national identity**.** This became obvious in the social media row over the Gorsuch interview:

- What is America?
- What makes someone an American?
- Is it merely a legal designation of citizenship or something more?
- And if the latter, then what exactly?

This is no mere academic dustup. In this 250th year since our nation's birth, America faces a decline in patriotism, chaos in mass legal and illegal immigration, the lack of assimilation of hostile enclaves, and the return of the politics of racial identity. The creedal reading of America, amplified during the Cold War as an ideological counter to Soviet universalism, now contends with

a culturalist reaction born from the catastrophic failures of nation-preserving at home and nation-building abroad. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya exposed the hubris of treating the Declaration of Independence as an export commodity detached from the people, institutions, and habits that gave it birth.

Neither side has concocted its position from thin air. Both appeal to early American sources. Both respond to real failures and real dangers. But when set in caricatured opposition as they are here—and on social media—neither captures the complex reality of our American Republic. It traps us in the back-and-forth of a false dilemma. A much better way to answer the question of American identity is to see *the people, the place, and the principles* as aspects of an organic whole.

One way to see the virtues of this alternative synthesis is first to formulate not the caricatures, but the strongest arguments—the steelmen—on each side of the creed vs. culture debate. Let us begin with the creedalist case.

II. The Creedalist Case

The best creedalists do not argue for principles in a vacuum. They argue that America, more than any other nation, was *constituted* by explicit moral commitments rather than by ethnic kinship or dynastic accident. These commitments, not genes, language, or religion per se, provide the normative basis of membership and loyalty.

The British writer G.K. Chesterton—hardly a secular liberal—observed this from a distance with admiring clarity. In *What I Saw in America*, he wrote that America is "the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence." He called America "a nation with the soul of a church."[5] Our country, in his rendering, is a polis that functions as a religious body functions insofar as it demands adherence to a set of propositions, not mere ethnic membership or historical happenstance.

There are several good arguments for this view.

1. The founding documents constitute the nation. America did not simply produce founding documents. Those documents founded America. They brought 13 separate colonies first into a war and then into a united constitutional order. As Harry Jaffa wrote, following Lincoln (who was echoing the book of Proverbs), the Declaration is the "apple of gold" inside the constitutional "picture of silver." The Declaration is the moral core that helps to give the entire structure its meaning.[6] Many nations are formed by peoples who draft charters to describe themselves. America was formed by a people who constituted themselves through a charter.

Lincoln understood this. At Gettysburg, he called the nation a proposition: "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."[7] He did not present the proposition so much as a settled fact, but as an aspiration to be tested and perpetually renewed lest it fail.

2. The creed enables moral self-correction. The single most powerful argument for the creedal view is its role in American moral history. Frederick Douglass indicted American hypocrisy in his 1852 "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" speech.[8] In doing so, he *appealed* to the Declaration. In the same way, when Susan B. Anthony argued for women's suffrage, she grounded her case in the Declaration's proposition of equality.[9] Martin Luther King Jr. later did the same in his "I have a dream" speech, calling on America to honor "the promissory note" of its founding documents.[10]

In each case, the creed provided the moral leverage that cultural tradition alone could not provide. A purely culturalist account of America, defined only by its inherited practices, would have no internal principle of critique against slavery or segregation. The creed enables the reform.

3. The creed creates a non-ethnic basis for citizenship. In *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, Seymour Martin Lipset identified the "American Creed" as liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and a laissez-faire economy.[11] This, he argued, is the primary explanation for America's distinctiveness among nations. One may disagree with his interpretation of the creed—as I do—but still affirm his basic argument. A national creed has enormous practical virtue: It creates a form of national identity that is available in principle to anyone regardless of ancestry.

A creed, rightly framed, allows us to define a cultural identity that is distinct from ethnicity. One can fully embrace the American cultural inheritance—such as the English language, Protestant-inflected natural law tradition, common law liberty, constitutional government, and habits of self-governance—whatever one's physical ancestry may be.

The early United States did just this: It purchased the Louisiana Territory and Alaska and annexed the Republic of Texas, Florida, and California. Each region contained peoples with a history, Christian tradition, and ethnic stock that were different from those of the original American colonies. These peoples *became* Americans. Similarly, Irish Catholics, Italians, Jews, and many others immigrated to our shores and assimilated to American culture without sharing its founding ethnic stock from England and (in slave states) West Africa.

The Irish Catholic, the Jewish immigrant, and the Vietnamese refugee can become an American by subscribing to America's principles, internalizing its practices, and becoming a legal citizen. No blood quantum, ethnic

lineage, or ancestral tie to Plymouth or Jamestown is required. This openness is why so many want to come to our country. It is also why America until recently could absorb vast new and far-flung territories and integrate millions of immigrants without the ethnic fractures that have destroyed other countries.

4. The universality of our founding principles is a strength, not a weakness. Creedalists argue that the truths of the Declaration—natural rights, human equality, government by consent—and the core truths presupposed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights are not just American quirks. They are grounded in human nature. They are universally valid even if not universally recognized. This means that, in addition to a history, America has a mission: to show both that self-government under ordered liberty is possible and that it allows more human flourishing than the alternatives allow.

George Washington expressed something like this in a 1788 letter to Dutch patriot Francis Adrian Van der Kemp: "I had always hoped that this land might become a safe & agreeable Asylum to the virtuous & persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong...."[12] Without invoking it, Washington was drawing on the idea of our country as a "city upon a hill" that began with John Winthrop and continued at least until Ronald Reagan. America represents an aspiration that is fit for all humanity.[13]

III. Where the Creedalist Overreaches

The creedalist case has real force, but it strains in two places.

1. There is the fragility of propositions in isolation. Creedalists often assume that because their principles are universally valid, the cultural origins of those principles can be left behind. (Recall Justice Gorsuch's formulation at the beginning of this essay.) But this does not follow. A truth can be both universal *and* culturally embedded. After all, the Pythagorean theorem is true everywhere, but it took a particular culture to discover it, and it takes years of education to grasp it. So too with the Declaration, Constitution, Bill of Rights, and the truths these documents presuppose.

Isolated propositions are especially fragile. When "all men are created equal" fractures into a dozen incompatible meanings, as it has, what holds the nation together? A noble notion of equality too readily becomes what Alexis de Tocqueville called a debased and limitless "passion for equality."[14] A purely creedal nation has no cultural reserves, no shared trust, no memory to draw on to resist this decay. It becomes an argument waiting to lose. Shared culture provides the social trust that makes constitutional government possible. It cannot itself be replaced by constitutional government.[15]

2. There is what we can call the exportability problem. The failure of recent efforts to export liberal democracy to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya suggests that we cannot simply plant our creed in alien cultural soil. Many countries now have constitutions like our own and pay lip service to equality, human rights, and the like, but they also have outcomes that are quite different from our own. This does not disprove the universality of the creedalists' principles, but it does suggest that the embodiment of those principles requires a specific cultural deposit that creedalism by itself cannot generate.[16] Think, for example, of the persistent problem of "shame/honor" cultures in much of the Islamic world.

IV. The Culturalist Case

On the other side of the debate is culturalism, which in its strongest form is not mere ethnonationalism. Thinkers like Russell Kirk, Samuel Huntington, and Roger Scruton make a different argument: Principles cannot float free of the cultures that generate and sustain them.[17] Ideas require *embodiment* in habits, virtues, institutions, loyalties, and the love of places and peoples. A nation needs far more than a syllogism. The culturalist insists on continuity, not racial purity. The question is not who your grandfather was, but what you love, what you know, what habits you form, and what loyalties you carry.

As with creedalism, several arguments can be advanced for culturalism.

1. The creed presupposes rather than creates a culture. The culturalist's strongest point is that the Declaration's "self-evident truths" were not and are not evident to everyone everywhere. Quite the contrary: They may have been evident to the men who wrote and endorsed them because of a specific intellectual and moral formation, but those men and those truths are the fruit of 1,800 years of Western history that draws from the deep wells of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. More specifically, the Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights draw from centuries of English common law, Christian and especially Protestant theology, the classical natural law tradition, Whig political theory, and colonial self-governance.

As Samuel Huntington has argued in *Who Are We?*, the American Creed did not drop from the sky. It was the product of "Anglo–Protestant culture," of the specific inheritance of the British settlers who founded America.[18] In this sense, the creed is the output of a culture, not its input. Huntington's famous counterfactual makes this point vividly: "Would America be the America it is today if in the 17th and 18th centuries it had been settled not by British Protestants but by French, Spanish, or Portuguese Catholics?

The answer is no. It would not be America; it would be Quebec, Mexico, or Brazil."[19] The point is not, for example, that Portuguese Catholics are inferior, but that the mix of theological, legal, and political traditions that produced our creed was contingent, not universal or inevitable.

This insight was present already in the Founding generation. "Providence," as John Jay famously wrote in *Federalist* No. 2 to persuade New Yorkers that America was already a single nation, "has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs...."[20]

2. The self-evidence of the truths requires cultural formation. In a Heritage Foundation *First Principles* essay, Gillian Richards Augros notes that the Declaration does not say that "these truths are self-evident." It says rather that "[w]e *hold* these truths to be self-evident."[21] This is a statement of a community's active assent, not a bare metaphysical assertion. The truths are self-evident *within* a shared moral and intellectual context, which Jefferson called "the American mind." Again, that mind was shaped by various forms of dissenting Protestantism (including a narrow thread of Catholicism and Quakerism), natural law theology, colonial experience, and the habits of self-governance of 13 related but distinct colonies. Without that cultural backstory, the proposition that "all men are created equal" is hardly self-evident.

3. Creeds need the right cultures to survive. Roger Scruton puts a related point most sharply: Nations are not contracts between individuals who share principles; they are inheritances. A nation, including our own, is a "first person plural" forged by shared history, custom, language, and loyalty to places and dead generations. Pure creedalism, Scruton warns, reduces citizenship to an ideology test. When the ideology fractures—as ours has—what holds the nation together? A purely creedal nation has no home to defend, only an argument to prosecute.[22] No soil, no memory, no love; just a syllogism, and no one dies for a syllogism.

On this score, Scruton points to the indispensability of "territorial jurisdiction" to meaningful self-government. He also notes that the "we" of the Constitution's "We the People" points to a preexisting people and not to some display of political founding *ex nihilo*.[23] This is true even of the United States, which really did have a Founding.

In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Yoram Hazony presses a related point: National identity is based not on race, but on "bonds of mutual loyalty" to a shared culture and history. These bonds are not abstract; they require a

specific people, place, and inheritance. In the breach, abstract universal principles, precisely because they apply everywhere, bind no one strongly. What moves people to sacrifice for their country is rarely a set of abstract propositions alone, but rather love of *this* country, *these* people, *this* land, *these* comrades-in-arms.[24]

4. Creedalism has a tendency toward ideological imperialism. Many culturalists note a historical pattern: Creedal nations are tempted to export their principles through force. The American wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were all justified in part by the creedal idea that freedom and "democracy" apply everywhere and that it is America's mission to spread them. American ideas of equality, rights, and consent of the governed became untethered from the institutions, culture, people, and place in which they prospered. The catastrophic results suggest that the creed, when severed from the cultural soil that nourishes it, can become an instrument of hubris rather than liberation.[25]

5. Without cultural continuity, the creed becomes infinitely malleable. The culturalist observes that the same creedal language—"all men are created equal"—has been invoked to justify wildly different, even contradictory, policies: open borders and closed borders, the sexual revolution and natural marriage, progressive redistribution and laissez-faire capitalism. A creed with no cultural context provides no stable political guidance. It is a "wax nose" that can be shaped by whoever has the power to define its terms.[26]

V. Where the Culturalist Overreaches

The culturalist case, like the creedalist case, is strong but lacking. It has three main problems.

1. Slavery. Any version of American identity that emphasizes cultural continuity over a creed must grapple with the fact that slavery was also part of the Founding cultural inheritance. The universal principles of the Declaration provided the moral leverage to condemn and eventually abolish it. A pure culturalist has a hard time explaining why slavery was wrong as opposed to merely inconvenient or inefficient. Frederick Douglass's appeal to the Declaration was not a creedal evasion of history; it was the most powerful weapon against the culture's deepest failure.[27]

2. Assimilation. If we define America as a specific cultural inheritance rooted in English Protestant settlements, what is the status of the millions of loyal Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox Christian, and other Americans whose ancestors came later? The creedalist offers a clear answer: full membership on equal terms for all who subscribe to creedalist principles and adopt the

relevant civic habits. Creedalism is not just consistent with strict requirements for immigration and citizenship; it requires them. Americans are under no obligation to admit those with political or religious views that are contrary to American principles. Culturalists, by contrast, struggle here: They either become ethnically exclusionary or must quietly concede the creedalist's point.[28]

3. The inevitability of principles. Perhaps Scruton's most powerful insight is that national identity must be particular and inherited, but even this insight is grounded in a philosophical claim about human nature and political order that depends on a set of universal principles. Culturalists cannot avoid principles; they can only argue about which ones are foundational. The claim that our nation is defined by its unique culture is itself a proposition.[29]

VI. America as a Covenantal Nation

Both sides of the creed vs. culture debate, then, carry real strengths and real liabilities. That tension is what calls for a third way, or a synthesis, that absorbs the strengths of both creedalist and culturalist arguments while avoiding their weaknesses.

One early American concept that can guide us in this endeavor is the idea of America as a *covenantal* nation. This concept draws on the Puritan tradition that informed the early American colonies, the theistic and natural law framework of the Founders and the West more broadly, and the civic-republican tradition of Lincoln. It provides precisely the kind of framework that goes beyond the false creed vs. culture dilemma.[30]

A covenant, unlike a mere contract, binds not just present parties, but past and future generations as well. It is something given rather than chosen. It is not merely inherited, because it makes moral demands. It confers both rights and duties. It involves a people bound to each other by shared history and place and is anchored to a set of principles that transcend and judge their cultural practices. For early American colonists, it included a covenant with God as the source of both our rights and our duties.

The notion of America as a covenant captures what neither pure creedalism nor pure culturalism can capture. It involves a people bound to each other by history and place, and it is anchored in principles that transcend and judge their culture.

- **From the creed:** It offers universal moral standards that judge the nation's practices and enable moral self-correction.

- **From the culture (or people):** It offers historical memory, shared institutions, love of place, and the habits of character that make self-government possible.

- **From place:** It offers rootedness in a specific geography that generates the loyalty and stewardship that abstract principles cannot generate.

To build on the richness of our nation as a covenant, let us now consider the synthesis "People, Place, Principles."[31]

VII. The Synthetic View: "People, Place, Principles"

People, Place, Principles captures the three irreducible elements of American identity and depends on several interlocking arguments.

1. Creed and culture: Partners, Not Rivals. As noted above, the debate between creed and culture is a false dichotomy. The two are organically related in a way that makes claims about their opposition misleading.

The Declaration's truths are not merely the projection of one culture's preferences. They are universally valid. But their self-evidence, intelligibility, and institutional embodiment are all culturally mediated. As Gillian Richards Augros puts it, "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."[32]

Conversely, the culture is not merely an inert substrate. Our Founding culture was itself shaped by the principles it generated. The experience of self-governance in the colonies, theological tradition of covenant and consent, and legal tradition of common law rights produced the Declaration and later the Constitution and Bill of Rights, but these documents in turn *transformed* the culture that produced them. Creed and culture move dialectically, each reshaping the other.

2. Principles require character, and character requires culture. The Founders' own understanding of republican government was deeply culturalist. They did not believe that just any people with the right constitution could sustain republican liberty. They believed that republican government, or what is now often called ordered liberty, requires republican character, and that character is formed by "habits of the heart," which Montesquieu and Tocqueville called "moeurs" or manners. These are more than mere ideas.[33]

Consider, for instance, Washington's 1796 Farewell Address, in which he said that "[o]f all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."[34] Or consider John Adams's insistence that the Constitution was "made only for a moral and religious people"[35] or James Madison's concern about faction.[36] All of these reflect the Founders' view that self-government requires a self-governing people shaped by virtue, religion, and civic habits. This is not a culturalist rejection of the creed; it is what the creed itself requires. The creed demands the culture that sustains it, but it also shapes and even transforms that culture. Liberty without virtue spawns licentiousness. Rights without duties spawn chaos.

3. Place: The Forgotten Partner. Creed and culture dominate the debate, but neither captures the notion of America as a place. The synthetic view includes it. America is not just an idea and not just a people. It is a *land*. It includes the Rocky and Appalachian Mountains, the Rio Grande and Mississippi Rivers, the Pacific coastline and Florida Everglades, the High Plains of Texas, the Midwest's endless fields of wheat and corn, and the Olympic Peninsula's temperate rain forests. The frontier shaped American character as surely as Christian theology did. Think of the protected harbor of Boston, the agrarian tradition, the continent's vastness and geographical diversity, the relationship between settlers and wilderness: None of this reduces to creed or culture, yet all of it formed who we are.

Wendell Berry has written of how "affection" of place grounds citizenship.[37] A purely creedal identity floats free of geography. It could exist anywhere, so it belongs nowhere in particular. A purely ethnic identity can survive exile, but genuine national loyalty requires a home. A home is not an abstract proposition, not merely a tribe, but *this* soil, *these* rivers, *these* purple mountain majesties.[38]

Nor is this a recent insight. In *Federalist* No. 2, just before his famous lines about America as a common culture, John Jay appeals to the particularity of our land:

> It has often given me pleasure to observe, that independent America was not composed of detached and distant territories, but that one connected fertile, wide spreading country was the portion of our western sons of liberty. Providence has in a particular manner blessed it with a variety of soils and productions, and watered it with innumerable streams, for the delight and accommodation of its inhabitants—A succession of navigable waters form a kind of chain round its borders, as if to bind them together; while the most noble rivers in the world, running at convenient distances, present them with highways for the easy communication of friendly aids, and the mutual transportation and exchange of their various commodities.[39]

The land is not a mere stage set or scenery. It is the material substrate of our loyalty and prosperity. Some will fight for a noble idea. More will fight for a beloved place. Even more will fight for a beloved place that is imbued with a noble idea.

4. Lincoln: Creed and Culture Working Together. Lincoln's statesmanship offers a profound historical example of the synthesis of people, place, and principles. Lincoln did not choose between creed and culture; he used the creed to call the culture to its own best self.

In his First Inaugural Address, Lincoln invoked "the mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land."[40] Two and a half years later, in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln did not simply invoke the Declaration as an abstract principle. He situated it in a specific narrative. He observed that "our fathers brought forth on this continent"—rooting the creed in a particular people's history and sacrifice. He called the nation to honor the dead of Gettysburg by rededicating themselves to a proposition.[41] But the meaning of that rededication was the cultural fact of shared sacrifice, shared memory, and shared place. The creed needed the culture to give it motivational force; the culture needed the creed to give it moral direction and a capacity for self-correction.

Harry Jaffa's interpretation of Lincoln captures this synthesis. Lincoln, Jaffa argued, was a "prophetic statesman" who recognized that the American people had been faithless to their founding principles. He then called them to repentance and renewal. Even years before he became President, in his 1854 Peoria address, Lincoln spoke of our "ancient faith" as an inheritance passed on by our "fathers."[42]

This is not the language of pure creedalism, which has no concept of national faithfulness or betrayal. Nor is it pure culturalism, which has no external moral standard by which to judge the culture. It is the language of a people with a covenant.[43] Such a people are bound to each other by the history of their shared place and are bound to a set of principles that transcend and judge their cultural inheritance.

5. The principles are true but require formation to be seen as self-evident. As noted, Gillian Richards Augros anticipates the synthetic view in her essay "Creed and Culture: Self-Evident Truths and the Formation of the American Mind."[44] Her argument focuses on the very text that creedalists are most likely to identify. The Declaration, she notes, says that "[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident." This is indeed the form of a creed, and like many creeds, it is not merely an assertion. The text does not say that the truths that follow are self-evident. Rather, it takes the form

of what modern analytic philosophers refer to as a "propositional attitude statement," as when one says "I believe that some roses are red" rather than "some roses are red."

Moreover, the signers of the Declaration claimed that the truths they affirmed are self-evident. How should we understand this? The details are complex, but the essence of Richards Augros's argument is that self-evidence is not a property of propositions in isolation; it is a property of propositions as grasped by prepared minds. The truths about human equality and natural rights are in fact true, genuinely self-evident, and accessible to reason, but they require a certain moral and intellectual formation to be seen clearly—to be seen as self-evident. That formation comes from a particular culture.

The synthetic view of American identity that includes a people, a place, and principles yields four mutually reinforcing propositions:

- The creed has universal normative force (against cultural relativism).
- The creed requires specific cultural formation to be perceived and lived (against naive creedalism).
- The culture is not arbitrary but is oriented toward and judged by the creed (against pure culturalism).
- The culture must be preserved and transmitted for the creed to persist (against progressive dissolution of our cultural inheritance).

VIII. The Virtues of the Synthetic View

The point of People, Place, and Principles should now be clear: It builds on the traditional notion of a covenant nation, resolves the tensions in the creed vs. culture debate, captures their key insights, and avoids their key liabilities. In this way, it can provide rhetorical guidance for those who seek to defend the American Republic effectively.

1. Against Naive Creedalism. Contrary to Justice Gorsuch's denial of an American culture, we should avoid treating the Declaration as a self-sufficient civic religion or suggesting that American identity is purely a matter of ideological subscription. The principles require a people to hold them, a place to embody them, and a culture to transmit them.

"Our creedal notions," philosopher André Archie observes, "can be made tangible through certain cultural practices that reinforce them."[45] This is

precisely the synthetic insight: The creed is not self-sustaining; it requires cultural practices, such as civic education, patriotic ceremony, shared memory, and common language, to remain alive.

2. Against Ethnonationalism. We need a way to distinguish cultural continuity from ethnic purity. The early American colonies were English colonies populated by colonists of English descent and by slaves brought against their will from West Africa. However, the American *cultural* inheritance is far more than this. It includes the English language, the natural law tradition, Christian-inflected moral formation, and common law notions of liberty. These cultural strands are available in principle to those who are willing to do the hard work of assimilating them. While a shared ancestry can be and historically has been a common way to form citizens, it is formation and cultural inheritance, not heredity and ancestry, that determine the fate of a nation.

3. Against Cultural Relativism. The synthetic view allows us to defend the principles of the American Founding and what they must presuppose even if they require the right cultural context to see their truth as self-evident. The Declaration, for instance, is not merely a tribal document; it makes claims that bind all human beings and that provide the basis for America's moral self-correction.

4. For Civic Education. The synthetic view justifies the requirement that civic education be principled, historical, and accurate. We must teach students and citizens not just the *what* of the founding documents but the *why*. This requires that Americans know their cultural and intellectual sources. It also provides a way to defend our founding principles while not whitewashing those parts of the American story that fall short of our highest ideals.

5. For Immigration and Assimilation Policy. The key litmus test for any definition of American identity is how it handles the central flashpoint in our contemporary debates: immigration and assimilation policy. Assimilation was long a key element of American success but in recent decades has been distorted or abandoned. If we are to preserve American identity as a people and place informed by certain fundamental principles, we must insist that immigration require assimilation.

In his response on X to Justice Gorsuch's claim that America is "not based on a common culture, even, or heritage," Matthew Peterson posted this:

> Assume this is true and that Gorsuch is also right about what that creed is.
>
> It hasn't been taught in generations and it certainly isn't taught to immigrants.

> But, of course, the truth is far worse than that. A new creed *has* been taught for generations.
>
> So to the extent that there is an American creed, Americans are (at most) deeply divided on what it is, and what it means.[46]

The synthetic view provides a defense of the need for assimilation and an account of what assimilation should require and what it can achieve. It is not the creedalist caricature: "Affirm the creed, sign on the dotted line, and you're American." Nor is it the culturalist caricature: "You can never really belong unless your grandfather lived here." Assimilation, rather, is how new Americans acquire the cultural formation that makes the principles intelligible and livable.

Assimilation requires learning the language, understanding and identifying with our history and unifying stories, acquiring the habits of self-governance and civic participation, abandoning customs and beliefs that are hostile to American culture, affirming and embracing the principles of our Founding, and coming to love this place and its people. Assimilation is demanding but not prejudiced. It is culturally assertive but not rigidly ethnic.

We must insist on these prerequisites for immigration and citizenship, especially if we are to avoid the narrow ethnic conformity that is common in many nations. Citizenship is not and should not be available to everyone. Some religious and cultural practices and beliefs are contrary to American culture. It is common sense, not bigotry, to reserve immigration to those who will embrace American culture and its principles and to deny entry to those who will not. The American Experiment can endure and be open to newcomers only if its citizenship comes with non-negotiable duties.

Our first President, George Washington, held these ideas together in a 1783 letter to Joshua Holmes: "The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent & respectable Stranger, but the oppressed & persecuted of all Nations & Religions; whom we shall wellcome to a participation of all our rights & previleges, if by decency & propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment."[47] For obvious reasons, champions of open immigration often cite this letter, but note the final limiting phrase, "if by decency & propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment." Not only right beliefs but right *behavior*, in Washington's mind, were prerequisites to entry even for those claiming the status of refugee.

6. For a Thicker and Broader Creed. Finally, unlike a narrow creedalism, the synthetic view preserves the creedal element of American identity without reducing the meaning of the American Founding—and of our national "creed"—to a single principle such as equality, liberty, natural

rights, or limited government. Such reductionism, which John Zmirak has referred to as "America the Abstraction,"[48] is a key source of ire among culturalists. People, Place, Principles captures the richness and depth of the ideas that informed the Founding generation and our foundational documents. The Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights contain interconnected ideas that depend on deeper, unstated premises.

As noted above, the most recited portion of the Declaration—"the greatest sentence ever written" according to Walter Isaacson[49]—does take the form of a creed for the original signers. It literally begins with "We hold these truths." These words deserve a certain pride of place in our national memory, but if they alone constitute our creed, why do Americans not routinely recite them? The closest thing we have to a recited creed would be the Pledge of Allegiance "to the flag...and to the republic for which it stands." We require immigrants to recite the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance as the final step in becoming American citizens, yet the Oath makes no mention of the Declaration. Instead, it says in part, "I hereby declare, on oath...that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic."[50]

If we abstract from these various practices, what do they suggest is the American creed? It must be more than one principle or one sentence from the Declaration. It must surely include the principles, both stated and presupposed, in the Declaration, the Constitution and its apologetic defense—the Federalist Papers—as well as the Bill of Rights and even the laws rightly derived from these principles. The American creed is not, in other words, reducible to one proposition from one text.

Take the principle most likely to be treated in isolation: equality. The signers of the Declaration held "that all men [that is, all human beings] are created equal." Given the context and the document's rhetorical function, we know that they meant at a minimum that no one is innately born to rule while others are born to serve.[51] Jefferson expressed this sentiment just before his death in a letter declining an invitation to attend a 50th anniversary celebration of the Declaration in Washington:

> [T]he general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately. By the grace of God, these are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.[52]

Despite the persistence of American slavery, Jefferson hoped his words would one day be applied fairly. He understood that all human beings share the same moral and metaphysical status and so deserve corresponding respect. That claim rests on a theological truth: Every human being has intrinsic dignity as an image-bearer of God. This equality is therefore unlike the mere sameness shared by sea slugs, for example, by virtue of belonging to the biological subclass *Heterobranchia*.

The Founders derived our unalienable rights (and logically corresponding duties) such as life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness from the principle of our common intrinsic dignity. They invoked equality in the Declaration because of that document's political purpose against the British monarchy, although intrinsic dignity is the more fundamental principle.

Shorn from its proper context, the claim "that all men are created equal" could be and has been mistaken for quite different claims. For the Founders, equality did *not* mean that human beings were equal in skill, intelligence, or virtue. Nor did it imply or require direct democracy. As the structure of the Constitution makes clear, the Founders opposed both the tyranny of the mob and the tyranny of the king.

Lincoln also understood this. In the very speech in 1857 in which he criticized the U.S. Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, he said this of the Declaration's most famous phrase:

> I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in "certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[53]

Nor would it have occurred to Lincoln or the Founders that equality required equality of economic outcome. Moreover, while it did require equal treatment under the law, equality did not mean that the law should treat people as interchangeable units. For instance, the DMV should not treat a child as if he or she were the same in all important respects as an adult, and a collegiate sports association should not pretend that a man is the same in all relevant respects as a woman.

An awkwardly self-aware failure to apply the principle of equality marks the first half of our Republic's history. The opposite error of progressivism marks the second half. Progressivism is in effect what happens when we detach the principle of equality from its cultural and conceptual roots. In

short, both to grasp fully what the Founders meant when they invoked equality in the Declaration and to avoid progressivist errors, we must attend to its public meaning at the time and to its elaboration in the Constitution and laws that proceeded from it.

As with the Declaration, so with the Constitution: Many principles that inform our constitutional order are not stated in our founding documents but are no less true and important. For example, the Founders shared a widespread conviction that while human beings are capable of great achievements, we are all flawed and susceptible to the unjust use of power. This was one of many commonsense truths, as Daniel J. Mahoney has said, that they did not have to theorize but simply took for granted.[54]

The various political and legal booby traps in these documents—the separation of powers among the three branches of government, separation of the states from the federal government, and limits on both government and the public enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights—were designed to prevent any one person or group from acquiring too much power. Such byzantine details make little sense to someone who is unaware of the impact of the biblical idea of sin on the early American mind. Human fallenness is thus surely a founding principle even though it lacks the rhetorical pride of place enjoyed by equality in the Declaration of Independence.

The same is true for several other principles, such as consent of the governed, rule of law, and ordered liberty. Our national creed includes several interdependent claims, some explicit and some implicit, that are expressed in multiple documents and nestled within a specific logical and theological context.

Conclusion

We should reject the false dilemma that pits the American creed against American culture. Rightly framed, they are partners in the same story. To capture and preserve the meaning of American citizenship and of our American heritage for the next 250 years, we should work to preserve the people, the place, and the principles that together form an indivisible whole.

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