

People, Place, Principles: This Is America

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A*merica and what it means to be an American are defined by the at once unique and intertwining elements of people, place, and principles. We are a spirited people, forged by a shared history and culture and the cause of self-government enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We steward the land of our predecessors that tangibly evidences their devotion and sacrifices with its monuments, battlefields, and homes. And we defend our rights and bind one another in gratitude, goodwill, and friendship as we accumulate generational debts and fulfill our duties across generations. Each of these elements offers its own contributions, but together they also form an organic reality and an exceptional nation.*

Introduction

What does it mean to be an American? Many citizens seem uncertain about what our country stands for, even amid celebrations of its 250th anniversary. Answers often point to a singular element: a people, a place, or an idea. But our country is all that and more. America is defined by the intertwining of people, place, and principles. Each of these elements offers its own contributions, but together they also form an organic reality and an exceptional nation.

James Madison’s theory of separation of powers and checks and balances provides a helpful analogy.¹ Each of the three branches of the federal government has particular functions and responsibilities, yet they are not strictly cordoned off from one another. Each holds a piece of the others. The President can reach into the legislative process with a veto, the Senate into the executive with its power to confirm.² This ongoing dynamic binds the parts into a coherent whole and ensures that all act with fidelity.

Something similar is true of people, place, and principles. Each component is uniquely valuable even as they cohere.

Americans are a people, united for the most part by a common language, religion, manners, and history. Beyond these are human elements like goodwill and gratitude that foster harmony and come through association. The establishment of civic friendship requires unity in a common cause.

America is also a place, a homeland, and human beings love their home. Its expansive territory as an extended republic supports deliberation and the sovereignty of the people. The qualities necessary to settle the frontier—self-reliance, adventurousness, and grit—still resound as part of the American character. The land has helped to develop America’s people and principles, just as they have developed the land. That land is shared across time, and the building of a civilization upon it has established ties of gratitude linking ancestors, contemporaries, and posterity.

A shared understanding of justice further binds a people. America is a nation grounded in natural law and dedicated to human equality, unalienable rights, and self-government. These principles inform the contours of our political institutions and how we treat each other, thus involving the “people” aspect of our national identity.

People, place, and principles shape one another, and that shaping is what makes America a nation rather than a mere plot of land populated by disparate tribes of varying beliefs.

People

The operative word for a people is “unity.” John Jay’s *Federalist* No. 2 provides a good starting point to examine how Americans are a “united people.” Jay wrote that the Founding generation was “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....”³

Jay’s formulation points to a common culture. Most colonists came from Britain, and the British Constitution supplied some measure of

established convention. Early settlers believed in the rule of law in general and the British common law in particular. Concepts familiar from British experience, like separation of powers, would even find their way into America's Constitution.

A common British culture laid the groundwork for the American culture, yet Americans also grew to distinguish themselves as a distinct people, including through the development of their own form of the English language.⁴ In 1789, America's "founding lexicographer," Noah Webster, wrote in *Dissertations on the English Language, with Notes, Historical and Critical*, that "Now is the time, and *this* the country, in which we may expect success, in attempting changes favorable to language, science and government.... Let us then seize the present moment, and establish a *national language*, as well as a national government."⁵

Being an independent nation meant developing a national language of America's very own to "reconcile the people of America to each other, and weaken the prejudices which oppose a cordial union."⁶ To that end, Webster wrote on the rules of grammar and pronunciation; produced textbooks, a spelling book, and a dictionary; and advocated for the establishment of schools. American English should be distinct from the King's English but uniform internally and adopted broadly.

Webster is most famous for producing his two-volume *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828.⁷ The dictionary is a valuable resource for scholarship on the Founding and early republic and is still cited by contemporary originalist Supreme Court justices to discern what terms meant in the 18th century. That uniquely American language underlies the Constitution.

A common religion can be as important as a common language in constituting a people. The influence of Christianity on the American Founding is well established.⁸ The Great Awakening swept through America in the 1730s and 1740s; 70 percent to 80 percent of American colonists attended religious services on a regular basis and often listened to sermons about Revolutionary principles; and the most referenced work of the Founding generation was the Bible.⁹

As a result, Americans were bound by an immense commonality of morality and the virtues born of religious practice. In colonial times, leisure was precious, and deciding to devote that leisure to worship was a revealing choice. (Today, it is a telling decision amid our culture of distraction.) An individual reserving an hour or more of his week to contemplate the divine and morality and to practice humility in bowing and genuflecting has a tremendous effect on the character of his community as well as his own

character. Such character formation was open to all, regardless of financial resources or social status.

As George Washington explained in his Farewell Address, it is possible to develop a moral framework through reason alone, but “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”¹⁰ Common religious beliefs and practices help to bind and preserve a nation by securing the virtuous citizenry on which a republic depends.

Manners as well as morals contribute to the national character. With the possible exception of George Washington, who copied out a handbook of *Rules of Civility* at a young age, no Founder thought more seriously about the importance of manners than Mercy Otis Warren.

Everyday practices are the bedrock of individual character, and manners reflect underlying principles and support virtue. Consider the effrontery and discomfort Americans today experience when customers are rude and condescending to waiters: They are not your servants! Aristocracies are characterized by clear distinctions and formalities. The “republican spirit” is more modest, requiring “patience, probity, industry, and self-denial” and a “simplicity of life and manners,” according to Warren.¹¹

As a people, Americans tend to be informal, hardworking, spirited, friendly, and a little bit gritty. Their manners do have characteristic corruptions and vices as well, however. In her *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, Warren cautioned that “the hurry of spirits, that ever attends the eager pursuit of fortune and a passion for splendid enjoyment, leads to forgetfulness; and thus the inhabitants of America cease to look back with due gratitude and respect on the fortitude and virtue of their ancestors.”¹²

The degradation of manners is tied to the degradation of virtue, including gratitude. Paraphrasing Xenophon, Warren considered ingratitude to be the “source of all enmities among men,” and an ungrateful man could not “love the gods or even his parents, friends, or country.”¹³ Warren also saw manners as being tied to memory. Her objective in writing a history of the American Revolution was to guard against “forgetfulness,” to sustain the shared story of a people.

Similarly, Jay ends his *Federalist* No. 2 description of how Americans are one people by writing that “by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war,” they “nobly established general liberty and independence.”¹⁴ A common history, a national narrative that gives preeminence to the origin story, is part of what unites a people. It reminds us of past sacrifices and acts of heroism and illuminates who we are.

While America as an independent republic was formed in the crucial years between the Declaration and the Constitution, the “peopling” of America began before 1776.¹⁵ As Christopher DeMuth writes, “In the 150-year colonial period before the American Founding in 1776, the settlers built a prosperous society with strong, independent local governments. It was a world of freedom, enterprise, and productive competition in commerce, religion, speech, and government.”¹⁶

For Americans, self-government was both an ideal and a habit. The colonists rebelled against the imposition of the Stamp and Sugar Acts in part because they had been attending to their own affairs for over 150 years. The Mayflower Compact of 1620 was the first governing document of the Plymouth colony, legitimized by the consent of the colonists and grounded in their own authority to govern themselves. Virginia’s elected legislative body, the House of Burgesses, was founded in 1619 and would play a vital role in American independence.

Civic Friendship: Uniting People and Principles

Beyond Jay’s formulation, a people is also sustained by civic friendship. Republican friendship relies on sympathies like benevolence, goodwill, and gratitude and is grounded in a shared understanding and love of the good.

The mechanisms of government are only part of what makes a functioning political order. In practice, civic associations and the habit of robust civic participation are also necessary and help to cultivate friendly sentiments toward fellow citizens. Matthew Mehan, associate dean of Hillsdale College’s Van Andel Graduate School of Government, writes of what “Cicero called the complex of charity (*caritates...complexa est*), which can be summed up as love of country. Cicero...makes clear that this deep network of loves is the primary source of any and all sense of civic duty to one’s republic.”¹⁷ Seemingly drawing on Cicero, whose arguments were ubiquitous in the Founding era, John Quincy Adams noted that sympathies between human beings begin with the family and then “spread through the social and moral propinquities of neighbor and friend, to the broader and more complicated relations of countryman and fellow-citizens.”¹⁸

The complex of charity is rich and multifaceted, encompassing love, friendship, gratitude, and goodwill. It arises from the less grandiose yet powerful obligations toward family members, everyday interactions with neighbors, and recognition of the sacrifices of ancestors. By gathering in civic associations to resolve a community problem or worship together, for example, citizens come to see themselves as friends united in common

cause and belief. Through civic rituals, we commemorate the past and create shared memories that cement our bonds with one another, even across generations.

George Washington believed such bonds to be so essential that he identified them as one of the four pillars on which the American national character and the “existence of the United States as an Independent Power” depended. He hoped that the “prevalence of that pacific and friendly Disposition among the people of the United States” would “induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and, in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.”¹⁹

In 1783, what was most urgent to Washington was the establishment or ruin of the American national character. Washington believed that “Liberty is the Basis,” the “foundation,” of that character.²⁰

The bonds of civic friendship are made possible by a shared understanding and concomitant love of the good.²¹ Washington so believed this that when he received a copy of the Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1776, he gathered the troops in New York so that the document could be read aloud to them. It expressed the common cause for which, and on which, they staked their all.

Civic friendship existed before the Declaration, but the people’s shared principles of justice were largely tacit. The Declaration articulated them more explicitly, and this allowed for a stronger love of the goods of liberty and justice that it described and thereby further mobilized the American people’s spirit of civic friendship in the cause of independence and the creation of a new republic.

Although civic friendship does not quite rise to the level of Aristotle’s highest form of friendship, which needs to be personal and intimate, friendship among fellow countrymen does depend on commonality of belief. That shared understanding and shared love sets bounds to discourse and behavior and opens the possibility of trust among citizens—the requirement for living a life in common.

Individuals who exist in fear of one another—of their property being stolen or their lives or liberty being infringed upon—cannot be said to be a united people. Only when there is a shared understanding regarding principles such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness can a people come together and live in harmony.

As distinguished Washington and Founding scholar Dr. William B. Allen has written, Lincoln and others believed that regimes are guided by “a shared view of justice that makes a people a people. This was a very old

idea, one expressed by Plato, and Aristotle, and Cicero, and Aquinas, and even Jefferson.”²² That understanding gives rise to noble loves, as loving something begins with knowing it. In turn, what we love reflects who we are, both as individuals and as a people.

Place

The “place” aspect of America has supported its principles and the rugged character and the unity of its people from the beginning.

Before the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, conventional wisdom held that republics needed to be small so that the will of the people could be aggregated and heard and affections among the citizens could be maintained. Yet the world was full of large states, and small ones were in danger of being conquered.

James Madison conceived of the solution to this dilemma of republican scale. A large, secure republic *could* allow for the voice of the people to be heard, and its very size would repair a characteristic defect of the republics of the past. Factions—groups adverse to the common good—were an endemic problem in republics: indeed, given the nature of man, they are a side effect of human liberty.²³ The Founders had to find a way to control the effects of faction; Madison’s solution was the theory of the extended republic.

Madison believed that because the American territory is so expansive, the factions it contains would be numerous, and this would make it more difficult for any single one to exert force. Instead, citizens would have to persuade one another in order to direct public opinion and form a legislative majority, and this would make it more likely that justice would prevail and permanently elevate the role of communication in the American regime (something reinforced by the people’s highly literate, participatory Protestant heritage). America’s extended territory would create conditions that demand deliberation, an essential feature of self-government.

The abundance of territory also meant that, in accord with Madison’s and Jefferson’s vision, most Americans could have a physical stake in their country. While serving in the Virginia legislature from 1776 to 1779, Jefferson introduced bills to eliminate primogeniture and entail and, with them, “feudal and unnatural distinctions.”²⁴

Widespread citizen ownership of land promoted self-governing habits, as the populace cultivated their own plots and formed communities. That, in turn, supported America’s principles. As Forrest Nabors, professor of political science at the University of Alaska Anchorage, has written, “Diffused

property ownership annexes a material foundation to the legal foundation of the sovereignty of the people.”²⁵

America’s land and climate boast an abundance of natural resources. John Jay observed that America was composed not of “detached and distant territories” but of “one connected, fertile, wide-spreading country” with a “succession of navigable waters” almost made “to bind it together.”²⁶ The sheer beauty and bounty of America’s land inspire gratitude, awe, and a love of and attachment to the good. Lincoln likewise would later credit America’s natural resources, as well as distance from Europe, for contributing to its prosperity and national security.²⁷

George Washington, a former surveyor, took care to give the American people coherence by developing the land’s connectedness. He championed the Potomac River Project, an infrastructure initiative that improved waterways and linked roads to those waterways. “The consequences to the Union,” he argued, “in my judgment are immense: more so in a political, than in a commercial view; for unless we can connect the new States which are rising to our view in those regions, with those on the Atlantic by *interest*...they will be quite a distinct people....”²⁸ The project would undoubtedly bolster economic prosperity, but it would also facilitate citizen interaction and the exchange of ideas, thus fostering friendship and unity. This was particularly important for maintaining a common culture with western territories entering the Union as states.

The cultivation of the land builds a civilization over time and unites Americans through ties of gratitude. When Jefferson argued that the Earth belongs only to the living generation, Madison responded that, while that is perhaps true of the Earth in its natural state, “[t]he *improvements* made by the dead form a charge against the living who take the benefit of them,” and such a debt “can no[t] otherwise be satisfied than by executing the will of the dead accompanying the improvements. Debts may be incurred for purposes which interest the unborn, as well as the living....”²⁹

The physical world around us is a tangible reminder of the contributions and sacrifices of past generations. We have buildings, roads, monuments, art, cities, and parks that are the product of taming the wilderness and unleashing the human capacity for creation. In some measure, contemporary citizens pay back that debt by adhering to the Declaration and the Constitution and by maintaining America as a free nation.

Taming America’s heartland not only transformed individuals into stewards, attaching them to the land through duty, but also built the American character and cultivated the virtues of a self-governing and resilient people. Those who settled the frontier were robust, simple in their manners, and

comfortable taking risks. In fact, Washington believed the rugged manners of Western citizens would have a renewing and moderating effect on the American people. They would help to guard against the avarice that could arise in the more commercial parts of the country.

That at once enterprising and adventurous spirit still endures as part of who Americans are. “Manners” were one of the uniting elements of a people that Jay noted at America’s inception. Those manners have been formed by America the place.

Aside from the “place” supporting “principles” and “people,” America as a place matters simply because physicality matters, because human beings are embodied. With that embodiment come instincts and innate loves. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “[t]here exists a love of native country that has its source principally in the unreflective, disinterested, and indefinable sentiment that binds the heart of the man to the place where the man was born.” This instinctive patriotism “does not reason, it believes.”³⁰

This instinct is worth taking seriously. We Americans love our home as our own, delight in its particular beauties and the unique traditions we have planted, and are attached to the soil where family and civic ancestors are interred. As Lincoln so eloquently articulated in the Gettysburg Address, our debt to our forefathers’ sacrifices calls to us most at battlefields, where the physical and intangible intermingle.

Instinctive patriotism, when combined with civic knowledge, evolves into reflective patriotism. America’s foundational documents and free institutions inform our character as individuals and make possible a dignified way of life. Reflective patriotism is a loyalty born of love of homeland but steeled by America’s principles.

Principles

The Declaration of Independence is the most cohesive, though not exclusive, articulation of America’s principles. In an 1825 letter to Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson noted that he was not aiming at “originality of principle or sentiment,” but rather was trying to articulate an “expression of the American mind.” The “harmonizing sentiments of the day” were “expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c....”³¹ For their intellectual grounding, the Founders relied on Christianity, the natural law tradition, ancient philosophy, British common law, and the Scottish Enlightenment.

Belief in and adherence to the principles of the Declaration were widespread: not just among prominent Founding Fathers, but among the

Founding people as a whole. The American people were a deliberative people, and this facilitated the proliferation of a shared view and deep love of justice. They were remarkably literate, in part because of the Protestant insistence that individuals be able to read the Word themselves. America boasted an extensive network of printing presses, and ideas spread through sermons, political pamphlets like *Common Sense*, and local and state resolves, declarations, and constitutions.³²

The principle of human equality was widely discussed and was expressed in nine of the early state constitutions.³³ Among other things, that maxim served to situate mankind within an ordered universe. In the words of John Adams:

[Equality] really means little more than that We are all of the same Species: made by the same God: possessed of Minds and Bodies alike in Essence: having all the same Reason, Passions, Affections and appetites. All Men are Men and not Beasts.... The blind are Men, and not Insects, the deaf are Men and not reptiles, the dumb are Men and not Trees. All these are Men and not Angels....³⁴

Human beings are not angels free from passions. Yet human beings are capable of reason and speech, equipped with free will and conscience. Such faculties make us responsible for our decisions. They mark us as part of the same species and distinct from animals. As Jefferson wrote, “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.”³⁵ No person has been born with the right to rule over others absent their consent, notwithstanding the variety of human physical characteristics and talents. Natural right is independent of human will, and individuals are called to discern and obey the dictates of nature rather than to attempt to transform them.

These principles call human beings, and especially Americans, to aspire to self-government, which has a multifaceted meaning. The concept of self-government informs what is fitting for the individual, how we ought to treat one another, and the contours and limits of America’s institutions. We can enslave ourselves through an improper ordering of the soul, by succumbing to addiction or passion, which allows impulse to rule over right reason. Human beings can seek to dominate others or disregard the duties owed to one another that are the reciprocal of unalienable rights.

Self-government on the institutional level means that citizens enjoy a real say in determining their laws and representatives. In *Federalist* No. 39, Madison explained that “no other form” of government “would be

reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.”³⁶

These definitions of self-government are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. As the Founders and the ancients alike contended, a republic depends on a virtuous citizenry. Self-government on the individual level supports a self-governing regime.

Duties and rights are two sides of the same coin: Duties remind citizens of their obligations to the common good and each other, binding a people. By nature, human beings are social and political. As Cicero wrote in *De Officiis* (*On Duties*), “the power of reason associates man with man in the common bonds of speech and life” and “prompts men to meet in companies, to form public assemblies and to take part in them themselves.”³⁷

Individuals are made to form families, communities, and institutions. Nature both prompts and demands varying obligations to each, but the appropriate fulfillment of those obligations, on all levels, makes a people.

These principles are eternal, discernible by reason and consistent with Revelation, though recognizing them requires sustained and painstaking citizen formation.

Because of their transcendent nature, the truths of the Declaration are able to bind American citizens even across generations. That includes Americans who have no ancestors among the Founding generation. As Abraham Lincoln said, when Americans of recent vintage turn to the Declaration,

[T]hey find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”³⁸

America’s grounding in these principles makes it an exceptional nation. It is a country deliberately founded on an understanding of what is fitting for human beings. It did not come about through “accident” and “force,” as is usually the case with other nations in history, but by a people deliberating and voluntarily uniting, in habits of the heart and mind, to further the cause of self-government.³⁹

Conclusion

People, place, and principles interact with and reinforce one another in a manner that is organic, reciprocal, and inseparable. Principles reach into the people by supplying the shared view of justice that unites citizens and makes civic friendship possible. Self-government informs how we treat one another, and individual rights come with requisite duties. Fulfilling the aspirations of self-government on all levels unites America as a people and a nation.

Americans are a deliberative citizenry, a characteristic promoted by America's expansive territory. The settling of the frontier influenced manners, making Americans a robust, resilient, and typically informal people.

America and what it means to be an American are defined by the at once unique and intertwining elements of people, place, and principles. We are a spirited people, forged by a shared history and culture and the cause of self-government enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We steward the land of our predecessors that tangibly evidences their devotion and sacrifices with its monuments, battlefields, and homes. And we defend our rights and bind one another in gratitude, goodwill, and friendship as we accumulate generational debts and fulfill our duties across generations.

This is the America of which we are citizens and that we have the honor and responsibility to preserve for these next 250 years and beyond. America is a particular people, a majestic place, and an experiment that is ever guided by timeless principles.

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