

## The Origin of our American Creed



In his second inaugural address, Barack Obama challenged us to live out the meaning of our creed as stated in the Declaration of Independence. But he then redefined those ideals to suit his political aims. Change is necessary, he said, because “when times change, so must we.”

Yet our founding principles need no modification. As Abraham Lincoln once wrote, these principles are “applicable to all men and all times” and serve as “a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

To preserve liberty, we must defend our principles, not change them. And doing so requires an understanding of their origin. To truly live out the meaning of our creed, we must first recognize what defined our founding as a nation. So let us objectively look at that beginning.

Colonial America was never home to a single race, language, or religion, yet a distinct American identity formed early in our history—the diverse American people were united in society by a common idea, a shared political philosophy based in Natural Law. Thomas Paine described this unique, but unexpected, American bond as follows:

If there is a country in the world where concord, according to common calculation, would be least expected, it is America. Made up as it is of people from different nations, accustomed to different forms and habits of government, speaking different languages, and more different in their modes of worship, it

would appear that the union of such a people was impracticable; but by the simple operation of constructing government on the principles of society and the rights of man, every difficulty retires, and all the parts are brought into cordial unison.

The American people were united by the conviction that their natural rights to life, liberty, and property are gifts from God; that individuals join in society by their reciprocal interests; and that government must be formed by consent and organized to preserve their cherished rights.

The American people lived by this philosophy even before their independence from Great Britain. Although the colonies were subject to British rule since their formation, the Parliament practiced a policy of “salutary neglect” until the 1760s and rarely enforced its laws in America. Robert Walpole, who was Britain’s first de facto Prime Minister from 1721–1742, explained the purpose for this policy, saying, “If no restrictions were placed on the colonies, they would flourish.” (In essence, economic liberty would lead to prosperity—what a concept!) As a consequence of this policy, the American people were largely left alone to govern themselves, and they did so through their locally elected colonial assemblies.

This arrangement soon changed, however, after the Seven Years War ended in 1763 and the British government found itself deep in debt with a large military force to maintain in America. Eager to obtain a larger monetary contribution from the American colonies, the British Parliament in the next decade passed a series of taxes on goods imported to and traded in America.

To be sure, the taxes themselves were not all that onerous. In fact, the tax burden for the average American remained very light compared to the average British subject at the time. But the American people decried the taxes for two major reasons. They considered it unjust for the British government to tax the colonies while they lacked representation in Parliament, and they feared that the taxes were just the beginning of greater British intervention in American affairs. So the American people ultimately resisted these taxes—through boycotts and by trading in smuggled goods—as a matter of principle, not because they were actually oppressed by them.

The British government responded to colonial resistance in a number of ways. It first repealed some taxes (mainly at the request of British merchants and exporters who were adversely affected by the American boycotts). Parliament later sent more troops to the colonies to intimidate the people. And then it tried to buy the compliance of the American people through the Tea Act of 1773.

The Tea Act was designed primarily to prop up the struggling British East India Tea Company by granting it a license to export its tea duty-free to North America. But it also aimed to undercut the price of tea being smuggled into America—tea that many Americans bought to evade the tea tax imposed by Parliament’s 1767 Townshend Acts. The effect of the Tea Act was that Company tea became cheaper (even with the Townshend tax) than smuggled tea, thereby presenting the American people with a corrupt bargain. They could buy Company tea at lower cost, but by doing so they would be implicitly accepting Parliament’s right of direct taxation in America.

The American people rejected the tea altogether. When a shipment of Company tea arrived in Boston in December 1773, Samuel Adams famously led the Sons of Liberty in an attack on the ship and tossed the tea into the harbor. This brazen act demonstrated that the American people were committed to liberty at all costs—that they would not betray their principles even when doing so might benefit them financially.

The Boston Tea Party made the Revolutionary War practically inevitable, for Parliament responded in 1774 by passing the Intolerable Acts, which then prompted the American people to convene the First Continental Congress.

At Philadelphia in 1774, the First Continental Congress requested the British government to redress its many grievances, but it also proclaimed in the Declaration of Colonial Rights the sacred principles upon which the American political union was based. In the very first resolution of this document, Congress declared that the American people, “by the immutable Laws of Nature . . . have the following rights: . . . that they are entitled to life, liberty and property; and they have never ceded to any foreign power whatsoever, a right to dispose of either without their consent.”

These were the principles that united the American people leading up to the revolution. And once war had begun, these were the principles that the American people committed themselves to preserve. In June 1776, the Virginia Declaration of Rights emphasized:

That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety. . . . That government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation, or community; . . . and that, when any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, inalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.

Then on July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress pronounced in the Declaration of Independence (drawing heavily from the Virginia Declaration) the following truths to be self-evident:

[T]hat 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 to 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.

By this declaration, the American people announced their inalienable right to resist a government that defies Natural Law. They formally broke their political connection with Great Britain to “assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and nature’s God entitle them.” And they set forth the fundamental principles that would forever guide them in freedom after victory in war.

This was the framework of our founding and the origin of our creed. Our nation was built by the blood and treasure of courageous Americans who fought to free themselves from foreign rule to live by the tenets of Natural Law.

We cannot change these principles without changing our identity, for the Declaration of Independence truly defined us as Americans at our founding—and it ought to remain the highest measure of our character today.

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Brian Vanyo is a political columnist, a board member of the Constitution Leadership Initiative and the author of “The American Ideology: Taking Back our Country with the Philosophy of our Founding Fathers.” A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Naval War College and the University of Virginia School of Law, he served in the U.S. Navy and is a veteran of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. He has also worked as an analyst at the Office of Naval Intelligence and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Visit him at [brianvanyo.com](http://brianvanyo.com).