

# UNDERSTANDING AMERICA



## What Is the Role of the People?



Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.

The *Understanding America* series is founded on the belief that **America is an exceptional nation**. America is exceptional, not for what it has achieved or accomplished, but because, unlike any other nation, it is dedicated to the principles of human liberty, grounded in the truths expressed in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and endowed with equal rights. As Abraham Lincoln once said, these permanent truths are “applicable to all men and all times.” The series explores these principles and explains how they must govern America’s policies, at home and abroad.

## About This Cover

The principles of self-government, and the virtues on which self-government is based, are not innate. The principles must be taught at home and in schools, the virtues must be nurtured in families, sustained in religious congregations, and fostered in life’s everyday interactions. As Americans, we have a pressing obligation to ensure that the next generation can uphold the principles on which this country was founded.

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# What Is the Role of the People?

The stirring opening words of the Constitution proclaim that it is the work of “We the People.” In the Declaration of Independence, the American people had announced to the world that they were sovereign and free. In the Constitution, they sought to defend this freedom by creating a unique government for an exceptional nation, a government that derived its just powers from the consent of its people. In this American republic, what is the role of the people?



*Much of civil society is personal in nature, not intended to remedy any broader problem. Americans' self-reliance is fostered in the interactions of everyday life—whether at work, as part of a religious congregation, or in civic organizations like the Boy Scouts.*



The United States is exceptional because of its universal founding principles. At the heart of these principles is the belief that people are free by nature and possess inherent rights. The use each of us makes of these rights will naturally be different, and the outcomes of those choices will naturally differ too. But the choice remains ours. Freedom is thus inextricably bound up with living our lives as we see fit. This is self-government in the truest sense of the term. We the people need not slavishly defer to experts. We can be trusted to govern ourselves.

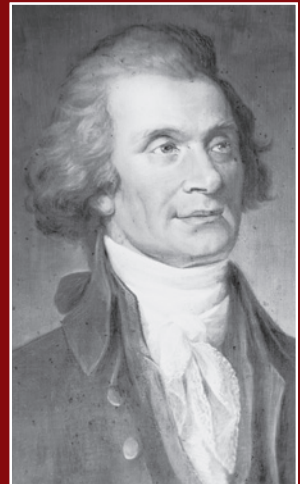
That is why government must remain limited: The people have given it only limited powers, as described in the Constitution. When government takes more than we have given it, it renders our choices meaningless. At worst, unlimited government is tyrannical; at best, it imposes a dull uniformity that crushes true diversity and saps the independent spirit of the people.

The Founders believed that a crucial problem was to avoid creating a government that could be dominated by a single faction. That faction might be a minority, or it might even be a majority. But no matter its size, it would inevitably seek to promote its own narrow

interests at the expense of the liberties of the people. One purpose of the Constitution's checks and balances, one reason why it divides and limits power, is to restrain the ambition of the powerful, and—in the words of the Constitution—to ensure that government genuinely promotes “the general Welfare.” As the federal government has grown over the past century, the business of government has increasingly become taking from Paul to benefit Peter, and then borrowing from Peter to pay off Paul. What the supporters of big government call the general welfare is merely the artful distribution of favors to particular factions.

The federal government is not supposed to be the most important institution in America. In securing the general welfare, it is supposed to do only those things that are provided for in the Constitution. It must, for example, provide for the common defense and regulate our relations with foreign nations. It must respect our right to enjoy the fruits of our labor by taxing lightly, and defend the freedom of the marketplace by ensuring the rule of law. And it must remember that the family and religion are where we learn virtue, and that without virtue, government cannot be both limited and free.

“When all government . . . shall be drawn to Washington as the center of all power, it will render powerless the checks provided . . . and [it] will become as venal and oppressive as the government from which we separated.”



—Thomas Jefferson

1821



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As John Adams stated: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” In the United States, government requires not merely the consent of the governed. It rests ultimately on the ability of the people to govern themselves. The first role—the first duty—of the people is to ensure that they remain virtuous and free.



That is why the American system is based on the rights of the individual, but not on individualism. When Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “it is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor,” he captured a vital truth of American freedom. The Founders placed great hopes in the Constitution, but they knew that no paper constraints could preserve liberty. That duty rested ultimately with the American people. The role of the Constitution was to restrain and to check, and—as Washington wrote—to “raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair.” The words of

the Declaration, the lives of the Founders, and the design of the Constitution can inspire, but on their own they cannot preserve the American republic.

Only the American people, steeped in the principles that inspired the Founders and animated the Declaration, can do that. And America's virtues do not appear out of thin air. They are not the result of individuals living in isolation. They are social virtues. They are nurtured in families, sustained in religious congregations, and fostered in the everyday interactions of work, hobbies, and life. Long before the Declaration, foreign observers were surprised by the number and vigor of America's social institutions, and by the everyday democracy of American marriage, work, and society.

Far more than any other nation in the world, Americans recognized each other as social and thus as political equals. That is why the traditional American virtue of self-reliance is so vital, and why the growth of government is so dangerous: Self-reliance means we have an obligation to try not to impose financially on our equals. Big government does not see citizens who provide for themselves and help their fellows; it sees subjects whom it must tax and on whom it must spend.

The wish of the Founders was not for us to live as isolated individuals. Nor was it to insulate government from religion and civil society. On the contrary, it was to insulate religion and civil society from the government, to prevent government from weakening and corrupting it. The Founders believed that, if the sources of civic virtue remained free and strong, the American people would remain capable of self-government. There is no magic in the American people that can save them if they do not save themselves. That is why Ronald Reagan said, in his famous speech on the Evil Empire of the Soviet Union, that “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.” As Americans, we have always an obligation to pass the inheritance of freedom on, unimpaired, to the next generation. That is the second duty of the people.



Today, everyone says they are in favor of civil society. But not everyone understands what it means. When the left speaks of civil society, it often implies that it sees civil society as the government’s agent, paid by the government to do the work that the government

has not yet taken over. In the realm of diplomacy, civil society is a code word for self-nominated left-wing organizations that claim to speak for the people of the world and assert a moral authority greater than democratically elected governments. Abroad, the United States needs to stand up for the legitimacy of sovereign democracies, which are the only governments that allow genuine civil society to flourish.

At home, Americans should not be taken in by the argument that civil society needs to be directed by the state in order to do good works. That is just another subterfuge that weakens civil society, conceals the hand of big government, and ultimately impoverishes us all, both spiritually and financially. This subterfuge rests on the deep contempt that the left has entertained for civil society since the 1960s, when it came to the conclusion that the job of the government was to liberate us from our oppressive private lives.

Churches, charities, or institutions like The Heritage Foundation are part of civil society, and all can do good work. But our bowling clubs, our Scout troops, and our farm stands are equally part of civil society. Just because an institution is social does not mean it is everyone's business. On the contrary: The power of

“The basis of [America’s] ideals and principles is a commitment to freedom and personal liberty that itself is grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted.”



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—Ronald Reagan  
*March 8, 1983*



*The Founders sought to protect religion and civil society from government interference, allowing the people to remain capable of self-government. It is our responsibility to pass on this inheritance of freedom to each new generation.*

civil society stems from the fact that so much of it is personal, not intended to remedy any broader problem. Government must be built on respect for the virtues that this civil society fosters, or it will ultimately destroy civil society. The lesson of history from Europe is that as their governments have expanded, their charities, churches, and social institutions have shriveled.

The United States is an island of stability in a world of turmoil. We have the same Constitution today that we had over two hundred years ago. Our concern to protect America from its enemies abroad, and to promote American leadership in the world, must never cause us to forget that our power to lead flows from our unique combination of a powerful but limited government with a dynamic and self-reliant society. When we see others abroad who share that vision, and who are struggling against tyranny, we should give them our friendship. When we see a tyranny fall, we should applaud cautiously, knowing that democracy is created from the bottom up, not the top down. Our role in the world flows from what makes us exceptional: to defend and promote the universal principles on which the American people founded their government.



That is why the true role of the people is to ensure that both they and their government stay faithful to those principles. This is partly a job for the free press and the ballot box. But we will not be able to speak and vote in support of America’s founding principles if we forget what those principles are.

In his great Farewell Address from the Oval Office on January 11, 1989, Ronald Reagan called on the nation to foster “informed patriotism.” Reagan believed that, after the end of the Cold War, the spirit of patriotism was in the air, but he thought that was not good enough. For Reagan, patriotism had to be “well-grounded” in popular culture, and to recognize always that “America is freedom . . . and freedom is special and rare.” American freedom began with the American memory, and if that was not preserved, Reagan warned, the ultimate result would be the erosion of the American spirit.

The cover of this essay alludes to Reagan’s charge. “All great change in America,” he said, “begins at the dinner table. . . . And children, if your parents haven’t been teaching you what it means to be an American, let ’em know and nail ’em on it. That would be a very American thing to do.” Reagan was right: We must understand



our Constitution if we are to defend what we have achieved under it, and we must know our history if we are to value the ordered liberty the Founders bequeathed to us. We must be free by governing ourselves, preserve our freedom for the next generation, and stand for freedom at home and abroad. We the people created this republic, and we the people must preserve it.



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# Enduring Truths

For links to these titles, go to [heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica](https://heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica).

- **Matthew Spalding, *We Still Hold These Truths*, ISI Books, 2009.**

Spalding explains and brings to life the 10 core principles that define us as a nation and inspire us as a people—liberty and equality, natural rights and the consent of the governed, private property and religious freedom, the rule of law and constitutionalism. Together, they culminate in self-government at home and independence in the world.

- **Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835 and 1840.**

In 1831, a young French aristocrat arrived in America to study its prison system and ended up writing the greatest book ever written on the United States. Tocqueville's study of the American spirit of freedom led him back to the townships where Americans learned the art of self-government through political participation and the formation of civic associations.

- **Edwin J. Feulner and Brian Tracy, *The American Spirit: Celebrating the Virtues and Values that Make Us Great*, Thomas Nelson, 2012.**

The United States was founded on universal principles. Upholding these principles requires defending not just the constitutional order, but the virtues of character the Founders believed were essential to citizenship. Feulner and Tracy identify and offer a powerful vindication of these virtues.

- **Edwin J. Feulner and Doug Wilson, *Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values Our Nation Needs Today*, Crown Forum, 2006.**

Conservatism seeks the ongoing improvement of a society in the context of an existing cultural system. The United States exemplifies the revolutionary idea that governments exist to serve their people, not the other way around. Feulner and Wilson argue that we must deal with today's crises by returning to these timeless principles.

# Current Issues

For links to these reports, go to [heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica](http://heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica).

- **DEPENDENCE ON GOVERNMENT.** William W. Beach and Patrick D. Tyrell, “The 2012 Index of Dependence on Government,” February 8, 2012.

Today, 67.3 million Americans depend on the federal government for housing, food, income, student aid, or other assistance once considered the responsibility of individuals, families, neighborhoods, churches, and other civil society institutions. The United States has reached the point at which it must reverse this trend or face economic and social collapse.

- **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.** Amb. Terry Miller, Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D., and Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., *2012 Index of Economic Freedom: Promoting Economic Opportunity and Prosperity*, January 12, 2012.

For the past sixteen years, *The Wall Street Journal* and The Heritage Foundation have tracked the march of economic freedom around the world with the influential *Index of Economic Freedom*. In 2012,

economic freedom declined and governments grew. This is not just bad for our prosperity; it is a sign of our retreat from limited government and from America's founding principles.

- **RESTORE PROSPERITY.** Stuart Butler, Ph.D., Alison Acosta Fraser, and William W. Beach, *Saving the American Dream: The Heritage Plan to Fix the Debt, Cut Spending, and Restore Prosperity*, May 10, 2011.

For far too long, Congress has been on an unsustainable binge of spending, taxing, and borrowing. Our nation is going broke, and we are passing the costs of these misguided policies to our children. *Saving the American Dream* is The Heritage Foundation's plan to fix the debt, cut spending, defend our nation, and restore prosperity. It is an optimistic—and realistic—approach to solving our problems that returns government to its proper place in the American order.

# About *Understanding America*

**AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED** that this nation, founded on the idea of freedom, has a vital responsibility to the rest of the world. As George Washington first recognized, the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” depended on the American people. These words remain true today.

*Understanding America* explores how the United States’ commitment to the universal truths of human equality and the right to self-government—as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—requires a vigilant defense of the cause of liberty, both at home and abroad.

## Other volumes in the series:

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# What Is the Role of the People?

*“In the United States, government requires not merely the consent of the governed. It rests ultimately on the ability of the people to govern themselves.”*

The Founders built the United States on the fundamental principle that we, the people, have the inherent right to govern ourselves. To govern effectively, we must ensure our society’s continued freedom and virtue, and pass the inheritance of freedom and limited government on to each new generation. This volume in the Understanding America series examines how and why we must live up to these responsibilities in order to maintain the Founders’ vision.

