

Why Is America Exceptional?

In 1776, when America announced its independence as a nation, it was composed of thirteen colonies surrounded by hostile powers.

Today, the United States is a country of fifty states covering a vast continent. Its military forces are the most powerful in the world. Its economy produces almost a quarter of the world's wealth. The American people are among the most hard-working, church-going, affluent, and generous in the world.

Is America exceptional?



The Declaration of Independence is significant not because it announced America's separation from Great Britain but because it proclaimed the conditions that underlie legitimate political authority and the proper ends of government based on the sovereignty of the people.

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Every nation derives meaning and purpose from some unifying quality—an ethnic character, a common religion, a shared history. The United States is different. America was founded at a particular time, by a particular people, on the basis of particular principles about man, liberty, and constitutional government.

The American Revolution drew on old ideas. The United States is the product of Western civilization, shaped by Judeo-Christian culture and the political liberties inherited from Great Britain.

Yet the founding of the United States was also *revolutionary*. Not in the sense of replacing one set of rulers with another, or overthrowing the institutions of society, but in placing political authority in the hands of the people.

As the English writer G. K. Chesterton famously observed, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.” That creed is set forth most clearly in the Declaration of Independence, by which the American colonies announced their separation from Great Britain. The Declaration is a timeless statement of inherent rights, the proper purposes of government, and the limits on political authority.

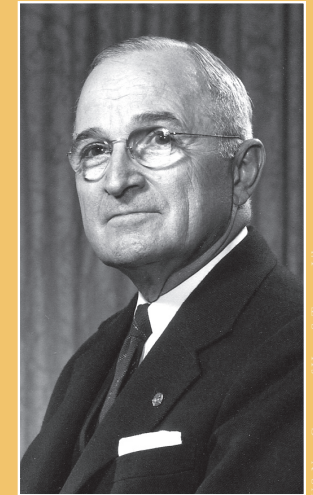
The American Founders appealed to self-evident truths, stemming from “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” to justify their liberty. This is a universal and permanent standard. These truths are not unique to America but apply to all men and women everywhere. They are as true today as they were in 1776.

Working from the principle of equality, the American Founders asserted that men could govern themselves according to common beliefs and the rule of law. Throughout history, political power was—and still is—often held by the strongest. But if all are equal and have the same rights, then no one is fit by nature to rule or to be ruled.

As Thomas Jefferson put it, “[T]he 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.” The only source of the legitimate powers of government is the consent of the governed. This is the cornerstone principle of American government, society, and independence.

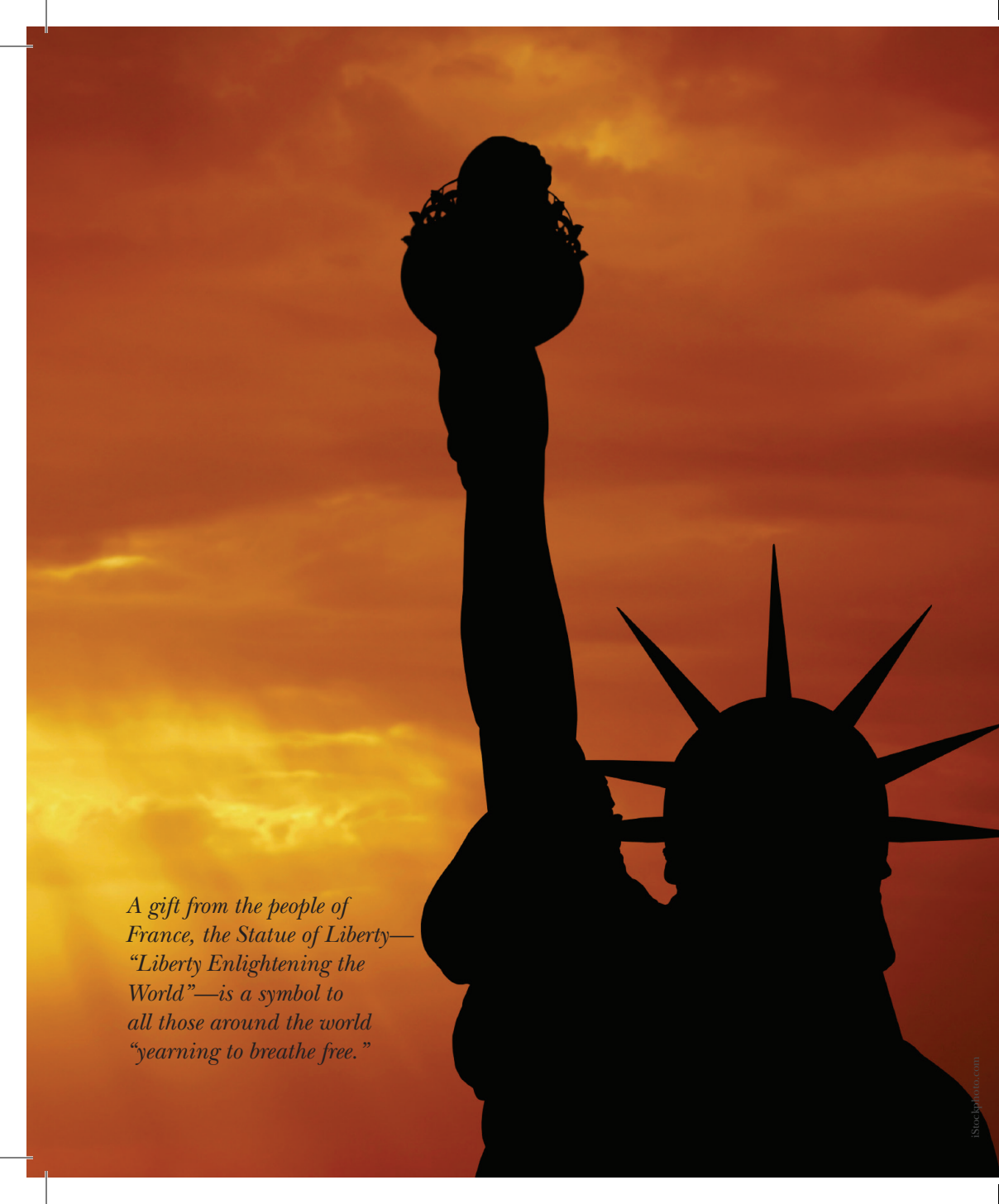
America’s principles establish religious liberty as a fundamental right. It is in our nature to pursue our convictions of faith. Government must not establish an official religion, just as it must guarantee the free exercise of religion. Indeed, popular government requires a flourishing of religious faith. If a free people are to govern

“Being an American is more than a matter of where you or your parents came from. It is a belief that all men are created free and equal.”



—Harry S. Truman
October 26, 1948

U.S. Navy, Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

A silhouette of the Statue of Liberty is shown against a vibrant sunset sky with orange and yellow hues. The statue is positioned on the right side of the page, with its right arm raised holding a torch and its left arm extended holding a tablet. The background is a gradient of warm colors, suggesting a low sun.

A gift from the people of France, the Statue of Liberty—“Liberty Enlightening the World”—is a symbol to all those around the world “yearning to breathe free.”

themselves politically, they must first govern themselves morally.

These principles also mean that everyone has the right to the fruits of their own labor. This fundamental right to acquire, possess, and sell property is the backbone of opportunity and the most practical means to pursue human happiness. This right, along with the free enterprise system that stems from it, is the source of prosperity and the foundation of economic liberty.

Because people have rights, government has only the powers that the sovereign people have delegated to it. These powers are specified by a fundamental law called a constitution. Under the rule of law, all are protected by generally agreed-upon laws that apply, equally, to everyone.

The United States Constitution defines the institutions of American government: three distinct branches of government that make the law, enforce the law, and judge the law in particular cases. This framework gives the American government the powers it needs to secure our fundamental rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The ultimate purpose of securing these rights and of limiting government is to protect human freedom. That freedom allows the institutions of civil society—family, school, church, and private associations—to thrive, forming the habits and virtues required for liberty.



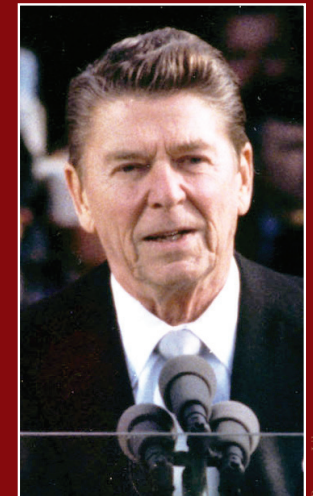
The same principles that define America also shape its understanding of the world. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that the thirteen colonies were a separate and sovereign nation, like any other nation. But America is not simply another nation.

The United States is a nation founded on *universal* principles. It appeals to a higher standard that all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. All nations are answerable to this principle, and it is this principle that makes the United States a truly legitimate nation.

Liberty does not belong only to the United States. The Declaration of Independence holds that all men everywhere are endowed with a right to liberty. That liberty is a permanent aspect of human nature everywhere is central to understanding America's first principles.

Nevertheless, the primary responsibility of the United States is to defend the freedom and well-being of the American people. To do this, the United States must apply America's universal principles to the challenges this nation faces in the world.

“Our founding documents proclaim to the world that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few. It is the universal right of all God’s children.”



—Ronald Reagan
July 15, 1991



The ideas that have made America great are as timeless as they are universal. The United States will continue to be exceptional as long as the American people continue to support and defend their founding political principles.

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This is not easy. America has not always been successful. But because of the principles to which it is dedicated, the United States always strives to uphold its highest ideals. More than any other nation, it has a special responsibility to defend the cause of liberty at home and abroad.

As George Washington put it in his First Inaugural Address: “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as *deeply*, perhaps as *finally*, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” America’s role in the world is to preserve and to spread, by example and by action, the “sacred fire of liberty.”



America is an exceptional nation, but not because of what it has achieved or accomplished. America is exceptional because, unlike any other nation, it is dedicated to the principles of human liberty, grounded in the truths that all men are created equal and endowed with equal rights. These permanent truths are “applicable to all men and all times,” as Abraham Lincoln once said.

America's principles have created a prosperous and just nation unlike any other nation in history. They explain why Americans strongly defend their country, look fondly to their nation's origins, vigilantly assert their political rights and civic responsibilities, and remain convinced of the special meaning of their country and its role of the world. It is *because* of its principles, not despite them, that America has achieved greatness.

To this day, so many years after the American Revolution, these principles—proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and promulgated by the United States Constitution—still define America as a nation and a people. Which is why friends of freedom the world over look to the United States not only as an ally against tyrants and despots but also as a powerful beacon to all those who strive to be free.



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Enduring Truths

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- **The Declaration of Independence**

The Declaration is Thomas Jefferson's timeless statement of America's first principles.

- ***The Federalist Papers, Essay No. 1***

In this essay, Alexander Hamilton introduces *The Federalist Papers*, which present the case for the Constitution and explain the principles on which it is grounded.

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

Spalding details America's founding principles, shows how they have come under assault, and lays out a strategy to recover them.

- **Peter Schramm, “Born an American: Reflections of an Immigrant Patriot”**

Schramm fled Communism in Hungary with his family when he was ten years old. He now teaches the first principles of the United States to his fellow Americans. In this essay, he explains how he came to recognize that it is from these principles that our blessings of liberty flow.

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The vision of the Founding Fathers was that we would control government, not that government would control us. The dependence of everyday Americans on government threatens our republican form of government, as well as broader civil society. Heritage’s analysis reveals why dependence on government is growing rapidly.

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.

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