

Module # 3: The American Creed

The American Creed consists of the principles that form the foundation for the United States of America, including the foundation for its Constitution, its system of law, and its overall purpose and vision as a nation. The American Creed is stated in the first founding document of the United States, that being the Declaration of Independence.

President John Quincy Adams gave recognition to these principles as forming the foundation of the United States Constitution when he said:

“The virtue which had been infused into the Constitution of the United States was no other than ... those abstract principles which had been first proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—namely, the self-evident truths of the natural and unalienable rights of man ... This was the platform upon which the Constitution of the United States had been erected.”

Abraham Lincoln similarly made reference to the importance of these foundational principles when he said: “I have never had a thought politically which did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”

The Declaration contains 12 such sentiments, or principles. These principles are also called, “The Twelve Pillars of Freedom.” The principles are the following:

Principle number 1: National Sovereignty. National sovereignty means national independence. The Declaration of Independence begins by saying:

*When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for **one people** to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and 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 ...***

This declaration that “one people” will “assume among the Powers of the earth the separate and equal station” is a clear statement of national sovereignty. The Declaration of Independence begins with national sovereignty. It also ends with national sovereignty. Indeed, the Declaration of Independence could just as well be called the “Declaration of National Sovereignty” because that is what the Declaration means.

Principle number 2: Natural Law.

Our Declaration of Independence says, as noted above, that the United States has become an independent nation based on the “**Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.**” That is, our nation is based on natural law. Natural law is the universal moral code that governs all people. Its precepts include equality, justice, the Golden Rule, the unalienable rights of life, liberty and property, and the Ten Commandments.

A college-level American government textbook, *American Government: Roots and Reform*, (1993 Edition) provides a good description of natural law as it states:

“Where Did our Ideas of Government Come From? ... classical and medieval writers such as St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that ... governments were ordained by natural law--basic and God-given rules that do not have to be written as much as discovered. Individual rights to life and liberty were a part of the natural law created by God.” [Karen O’Connor and Larry J. Sabato (New York: Longman Publishing) p. 6]

(Because natural law is so important to the United States and to all civilized life, and because natural law is not well understood, Cmod #4 will provide a detailed description of it.)

Principle number 3: Self-evident truth.

The third pillar of freedom asserted in the Declaration of Independence is self-evident truth. The Declaration states:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident ...”

That is, the Declaration views truth as genuine, knowable and fundamental to the basic principles of government—in contrast to the modern and radical view of truth which see it as a mere “construct” in the minds of individuals (called “constructivism” and/or postmodernism).

Principle number 4: Equality.

The Declaration of Independence says:

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are **created equal** ...”*

The Declaration states that all people are equal because they were created that way by God. As a consequence, all people are to be equal before the law, that is, the legitimate claims of all people shall have equal standing including their legitimate claims of life, liberty and property.

The term “men” is here used in the generic sense and means human beings regardless of race, gender, social standing, income, disability and the like. The liberal interpretation of the Declaration which asserts that it is a racist and sexist document is blatantly false.

Principle number 5: Inalienable Rights.

The Declaration of Independence states:

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are **endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights** ...”*

Our forefathers understood that our rights have been given to us by God, and for that reason these rights are “unalienable.” Today we say “inalienable.” Our forefathers

recognized that the fundamental human rights, such as life, liberty and property, are not granted by government; they have been granted by God. The role of government, then, is to protect these God-given rights.

In this way the founders of our nation clarified that government had a lower level of authority than the inalienable rights of its people. Governments do not grant rights, nor do rights depend on government. On the contrary, government rests on the human rights, some of which are allocated to government by the people for the sake of good order.

Principle number 6: The inalienable Right to Life.

The Declaration of Independence states:

*“... they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are **Life**, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness ...”*

The first right mentioned is that of life since other rights mean nothing without the right to life.

Principle number 7: The Inalienable Right to Liberty.

The Declaration of Independence states:

*“... they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, **Liberty**, and the pursuit of Happiness ...”*

Liberty, or freedom, is the second listed right. In this way the colonists declared their independence from Great Britain and also stated in principle their opposition to slavery. This principle was not fully put into effect until the Civil War, the reason being that the Southern states would not have joined the union otherwise.

Principle number 8: The Inalienable Right to Private Property.

The Declaration of Independence uses the term “**pursuit of happiness**” for this right. Amendments 5 and 14 to the United States Constitution state that no person may be deprived of “life, liberty, or property” without due process of law. That is, the Constitution clarifies that “pursuit of happiness” refers primarily to the right of personal property. The founding fathers defined “property” broadly so as to include much more than physical property, but also time, talents, opportunities, freedom and life itself.

Principle number 9: The primary purpose of government is the protection of the inalienable rights.

The Declaration of Independence states it this way:

“That, to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men ...”

That is, government has one over-arching purpose--protecting the inalienable rights of all people.

Principle number 10: Popular Sovereignty.

The Declaration of Independence states this principle with the words:

*“That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, **deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.**”*

That is, the people have a higher level of authority than government, and government has only those powers delegated to it by the citizens (as guaranteed by Amendments nine and ten to the Constitution). For this reason, the Constitution of the United States was created to be a social contract by which the states and the people designated some of their powers to the federal government for the sake of good order and national defense.

Principle number 11: Federalism and States’ Rights.

The last paragraph of the Declaration of Independence says:

*“That these United States are, and of Right ought to be, **Free and independent states**; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as **Free and Independent States**, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce and do all other Acts and Things which **Independent States** may of right do.”*

In this way the Declaration of Independence emphatically affirmed the sovereignty of the federal United States and the sovereignty of the separate states. The Declaration envisioned a federal system of government with the states delegating some of their power to the federal government while retaining other powers for themselves. The federal system of government is explained in the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution which stipulates that any powers not specifically delegated to the federal government by the Constitution are reserved for the states and the people respectively.

Principle number 12: Divine Providence.

The Declaration of Independence ends with this sentence:

*“And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the **Protection of Divine Providence**, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”*

That is, the colonists stated their conviction that there is a God in the Heavens who governs in the affairs of men. The signers of the Declaration were convinced that their cause was just and that the just God, earlier in the Declaration referred to as the “Supreme Judge of the world,” would be on their side.

It was largely because of this conviction that they believed they would be successful against what was arguably the most powerful military force in the world at that time.

Sample Lesson Plan

Grade levels: 9-12, college—graduate level (College and graduate level students should also compare the American Creed’s view of human rights—that rights are God-given and inalienable—to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ view, which says that human rights are subject to the policies of the UN.)

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Memorize the first few lines of the Declaration of Independence, starting at the very beginning and continuing to the words, “consent of the governed.”
2. Be able to list the 12 principles that make up the American Creed.
3. Understand the meaning of each of the principles.
4. Be able to apply the principles to a variety of political and social issues.

Materials:

9. Overhead projector and slides or power-point technology.
10. Student access to the internet.
11. Printed resources.
12. Teachers may, for in-depth analysis, wish to use some of the information in Cmod # 4: Natural Law.

Procedures:

1. Teachers may wish to lecture on this information or may assign students to the CMods webpage.
2. To explore the relationship between the American Creed and the United States Constitution, the teacher may wish to use the following questions:
 - a) Does the U.S. Constitution directly state that American citizens have a right to life? (The correct answer is “no.”)
 - b) Why is this? (The answer is the Declaration of Independence and Constitution are a unit and the Constitution does not restate the foundational principles already stated in the Constitution, but everywhere assumes they are understood and true.)
3. In order to explore applications of the American Creed, students may be asked the following questions:
 - a. How does the American Creed apply to slavery?

- b. How does the American Creed apply to legalized abortion?
 - c. How does the American Creed apply to levels and forms of taxation?
 - d. How does the American Creed apply to national defense?
 - e. How does the American Creed apply to the recent Kelo Decision of the U.S. Supreme Court?
4. Ask students to apply the principle of natural law to the statement, “You can’t legislate morality.” (See Cmod # 4.)
 5. Ask students to apply natural law to “value free” comprehensive sex education. (Answer: Comprehensive sex education assumes that natural law does not exist. That is why it is ineffective in reducing STDs and unwanted pregnancy.)
 6. Consider the question, “How did the Civil War affect the U.S. federal system of government? (Answer, it had the effect of establishing the federal government as a higher authority than state governments.)

Vocabulary:

American Creed: The values and beliefs that form the philosophical foundation for the United States system of law and government including its Constitution. The American Creed is contained in the United States Declaration of Independence and is accurately summarized by the Twelve Pillars of Freedom. The United States of America is perhaps the only country to be founded on an idea. That idea is the American Creed.

Equality: The principle of the American Creed which holds that because God created all people as equals, all people have a right to be treated equally by law. Equality does not mean “the same.” People are not created to be the same by God, but to be equal before God and the law. For that reason Government does not have a role in securing the same results for individuals, such as equal incomes, but does have a role in securing equal opportunities within reasonable limits. The correct definition of “equality before the law” is that people’s legitimate claims, such as legitimate claims to property, are to be equal before the law.

Federalism: A form of government creating a balance of power between the federal government and the state governments. Federalism forms a critical portion of the checks and balances built into the American system of government, the other two checks and balances comprising the checks and balances between the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial) and the two legislative branches (House and Senate). In the federal system, both the state and federal governments derive their authority directly from the citizens, not from the other branch of government.

Natural law: Or the law of nature (Latin: *lex naturalis*) is the universal moral code that is part of the innate structure of all people and, therefore, has validity for every culture and government. Natural law is the proper and just standard for governmental law, and thus functions as a criterion for evaluating civil law. The content of natural law and the Ten

Commandments (revealed law) is the same, but natural law operates by reason based on principles contained in the genetic code of all persons, whereas revealed law is known by written records including the Bible. In part because of the intersection of natural law and natural rights, natural law is a prominent component of the United States Declaration of Independence.

Truth: Is defined by the Declaration as being universal and absolute. That is, truth is viewed as being the same and for all people, for all cultures, for all governments and for all time. The radical views of truth which define truth as being relative to a culture (postmodernism) or relative to the individual (humanism) are foreign to the American Creed.