

American Identity: Liberty, Virtue, and the Tension at the Founding

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Americans routinely invoke phrases from their founding documents: *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; a league of friendship; a more perfect Union* as if they form a settled creed. Yet these words did not emerge from a single ideology or a moment of consensus. They were forged from a contested intellectual inheritance shaped by religious conviction, classical history, English political struggle, and Enlightenment moral philosophy. American identity, from its beginning, was not a static doctrine but a disciplined tension: between liberty and restraint, virtue and self-interest, moral aspiration and political realism.

The Declaration of Independence marked a decisive moment in that struggle. As Jay Parini observes, the “American dream” begins in earnest with the Declaration, even though the document neither created a government nor enumerated civil rights. Written amid looming war, it functioned as political persuasion as much as legal argument. Its achievement lay in transforming a colonial rebellion into a principled claim to sovereignty grounded not merely in grievances, but in moral justification.

That justification did not arise in a vacuum. Colonial political thought was profoundly shaped by the legacy of the English Civil War. The conflict demonstrated that subjects could lawfully resist and even depose a king who violated the law and the rights of the people. Experiments in governance during the Commonwealth and Protectorate forced sustained reflection on sovereignty, constitutional limits, and the location of political authority. These debates crossed the Atlantic, shaping colonial assemblies’ understanding of their own legitimacy and autonomy.

Religious thinkers in America gave this inheritance moral force. Few figures were more influential than Jonathan Mayhew, whose sermons challenged the doctrine of passive obedience and argued that tyrannical rulers forfeited their divine mandate. Resistance, in Mayhew’s formulation, was not merely permissible; it was a Christian duty. Political liberty thus became

inseparable from moral responsibility, embedding resistance theory within a broader ethical framework that resonated deeply in colonial society.

Historical consciousness further reinforced this moral seriousness. As Arthur Schlesinger noted, the fall of Rome loomed large in the founders' imagination. Roman history served as a cautionary tale about the fragility of republics and the inevitability of corruption. Calvinist theology and classical republicanism, though rooted in different premises, converged on a sobering conclusion: human efforts are finite and prone to decay. Liberty, once achieved, could not sustain itself without vigilance, restraint, and institutional design.

Modern scholars have struggled to capture this complexity. Alan Gibson identifies multiple interpretive traditions: classical republican, liberal, economic, religious, and pluralist each emphasizing a different strand of the Founders' thought. The most persuasive reading is not that one tradition triumphed, but that the Founders consciously drew from many. American identity was forged through synthesis rather than purity, pragmatism rather than ideology.

This synthesis becomes especially clear in the Declaration's most misunderstood phrase: *the pursuit of happiness*. In the founding era, happiness did not mean private pleasure or personal fulfillment. As Carol Conklin demonstrates, it referred to moral flourishing rooted in classical philosophy, Enlightenment moral sense theory, Protestant theology, and republican thought. Happiness was understood as a public good - the proper end of government itself. Conklin notes that law, as William Blackstone argued, existed to protect rights in ways that enabled individuals and communities to thrive morally and socially. Liberty was therefore instrumental, not absolute: a means to human excellence rather than an end in itself.

Such a vision depended on virtue. The Founders believed republics required citizens capable of subordinating private interest to the public good. Civic virtue - industry, frugality, honesty, and vigilance against corruption - was indispensable. Many located religion as virtue's primary source. Yet confidence in virtue alone was waning. As Joyce Yarbrough

notes, while classical republicans insisted on moral character as the foundation of liberty, the Framers increasingly relied on institutional safeguards to manage self-interest. Garrett Sheldon emphasizes James Madison reliance on constitutional structure over civic virtue. Madison, as a principal writer of the constitution, believed separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism would channel ambition against ambition, and thus manage human weakness. Madison did not reject virtue, but he refused to depend on it. Yarbrough indicates that Gordon Wood argued that this shift marked the end of classical republicanism and the birth of a liberal representative democracy designed to function even when virtue failed.

This unresolved tension, between moral aspiration and institutional realism, became the defining feature of American identity. The Constitution did not abandon virtue, but neither did it depend upon it. Instead, it sought to channel ambition, restrain power, and preserve liberty through structure rather than moral perfection.

The result, as Gunnar Myrdal observed according to Schlesinger , was a nation perpetually caught between creed and reality. That conflict has not been a weakness alone; it has been a source of critique, reform, and renewal. America has continuously struggled for its soul precisely because its founding principles invite judgment against themselves. The enduring value of the American Founding lies in this complexity. As Peter Carrese concludes, the Founders sought a political order that fostered reflection and choice rather than submission to passion and force. The Founders created a system designed to function amid disagreement. The test today is whether that system can sustain disagreement that extends to the legitimacy of the system itself whether constitutional structure can survive when citizens question not just policy but the framework for making policy. The question may no longer be whether virtue can sustain liberty, but whether procedural liberalism can sustain itself without shared commitments. The disciplined tension has become an undisciplined polarization.

American identity has never been simple, settled, or complacent. It was designed as a moral and political experiment; one that demands continual engagement, restraint, and responsibility from those who inherit it.

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