

“THE AMERICAN MIND”

WEEK 1 — LARRY P. ARNN ∞ PRESIDENT, HILLSDALE COLLEGE

AMERICA’S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, Thomas Jefferson said, was the product of “the American mind.” Our Constitution was made with the same purpose as the Declaration—to establish a regime where the people are sovereign, and the government protects the rights granted to them by their Creator.

LECTURE SUMMARY

The word “constitution” means “to ordain and establish something.” It also means “to set a firm thing strongly in place.” It is linked to two other words: “statute” and “statue.” All three words—constitution, statute, and statue—connote a similar idea of establishing something lasting and beautiful.

The Constitution, then, is a work of art. It gives America its form. To fully know the “cause,” or purpose, of America, one must know the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, its author, mentioned four thinkers for their contribution to molding “the American mind”: Aristotle, Cicero, Algernon Sidney, and John Locke.

Studying these philosophers is a wondrous task in itself, and it greatly helps our understanding of America, just as it informed the statecraft of the Founders. Knowing the meaning of the Declaration and Constitution is vital to the choice before us today as to whether we will live under a Constitution different than the one bequeathed to us.

KEY PASSAGES FROM THE READINGS

LETTER TO HENRY LEE ∞ *Thomas Jefferson*

“This was the object of the Declaration of Independence... Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 11)

ON THE COMMONWEALTH ~ Cicero

“True law is right reason, consonant with nature, spread through all people.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 29)

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS ~ Aristotle

“[T]he human good comes to be disclosed as...the soul in accordance with virtue.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 21)

THE POLITICS ~ Aristotle

“From these things it is evident, then, that the city belongs among the things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 25)

DISCOURSES CONCERNING GOVERNMENT ~ Algernon Sidney

“But nothing can be more absurd than to say, that one man has an absolute power above law to govern according to his will.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 45)

SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT ~ John Locke

“The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 32)

FRAGMENT ON THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNION ~ Abraham Lincoln

“That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 68)

THE INSPIRATION OF THE DECLARATION ~ Calvin Coolidge

“It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 712)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to Thomas Jefferson, what is the purpose of the Declaration of Independence?
2. Dr. Arnn connects “constitution” with two other words. What are they, and why are they significant?

3. What is the definition of “constitution”, according to Dr. Arnn?
4. Aristotle describes man as a _____ animal. What does this mean?
5. What does Abraham Lincoln call the “apple of gold”? And what is the “frame of silver”? How are these two elements related to each other?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are works of art, what is it that makes them beautiful?
2. If the vision of David inspired Michelangelo to sculpt the *David*, what inspires Americans to the love of their country?
3. Why was it so important that the Founders were educated in the political philosophy of what Dr. Arnn calls “the Western tradition”?
4. Dr. Arnn notes that “It’s very difficult to imagine the American Revolution happening at all without George Washington.” Do you agree with this statement?
5. Calvin Coolidge notes that the central ideas of the Declaration of Independence are “final” in that they cannot be improved upon with progress. He goes on to say that these eternal truths resulted from the “spiritual insight of the people.” What does this mean? How does it relate to Coolidge’s statement that “the things of the spirit come first,” before material things?



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