

The 6 (Six) Tenets of American Exceptionalism Embedded in the Declaration

The Founders Bible – David Barton

- 1. There Is a Creator**
 - 2. Inalienable Rights Come from God – From The Creator**
 - 3. Government Is to Protect Inalienable Rights – The Creators Design for Government**
 - 4. There Is a Fixed Moral Law – Laws of Nature and Natures God – Established by the Creator**
 - 5. The Consent of the Governed**
 - 6. Alter, Abolish, or Create a New Government**
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American Exceptionalism describes the unprecedented stability, freedom, and prosperity that is the result of the institutions and policies produced by a unique governing philosophy.

America truly is an exceptional nation. This was early affirmed by Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who traversed America in 1831 and then published *Democracy in America*, in which he extolled:

The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. ¹

The unique philosophy behind American Exceptionalism is encapsulated in six fundamental principles set forth in the first 155 words of our national birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence, and then subsequently incorporated into the Constitution:

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 of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. 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, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government.

Consider the six tenets that produced American Exceptionalism.

1. There Is a Creator

"... all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator..."

By this admission, government acknowledges that there is a Power higher than itself and to which even it must be subject. This is the first factor in establishing a limited government, and the Founding Fathers repeatedly stressed the importance of this recognition by government:

It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor. ² George Washington

The safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessing of Almighty God, and the national acknowledgment of this truth is an indispensable duty which the people owe to Him. ³ John Adams

Thomas Jefferson similarly reminded citizens that being "a happy and a prosperous people" must begin with "acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence"-an element he listed as the first component of "good government." 4 (For more about the importance of publicly acknowledging God, see the commentary accompanying Prov 3:5-6 commentary.)

2. Inalienable Rights Come from God

"...they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights..."

Having acknowledged that there is a Creator, government must then recognize that certain rights come only from God. Government thus acknowledges that it is not the source of all things necessary for man.

An inalienable right is one that God Himself bestowed on every individual long before there was any civil government. As John Adams affirmed, inalienable rights are "antecedent to all earthly government...and cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws-rights derived from the great Legislator of the Universe." 5 John Dickinson described them as rights "which God gave to you and which no inferior power has a right to take away." 6 Alexander Hamilton noted that inalienable rights...

are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature by the aid of the Divinity itself and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power. 7

What are our God-given inalienable rights? The Founding Fathers listed several in the Declaration and many more in the Bill of Rights, including the right to life, liberty, property, self-defense, freedom of religion, conscience, speech, assembly, and many others.

Rights come either from God or man. If they come from God, man can be required to recognize and protect them; but if they come from man, man has the power to regulate, alter, or abolish them, and government's power over our lives therefore becomes absolute and unlimited. Our Framers understood that irrevocable limitations can be placed on government only when God is recognized as the Source of our rights-an application of the Biblical requirement from Ex 18:21 that civil leaders be "able men who fear God"-rulers who recognize a Divine Creator, and that He gives certain rights to man.

Significantly, a secular government cannot be a limited government, for it recognizes no authority other than itself, and no rights other than those that it bestows. The recognition of God-given rights is the second tenet producing American Exceptionalism.

3. Government Is to Protect Inalienable Rights

"That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men..."

Once government recognizes that there is a God and that He gives specific rights to man, it then becomes the duty of government to secure to every individual the practice of those God-given rights. Samuel Adams avowed that government "was originally designed for the preservation of the unalienable rights." 8 James Wilson said that "the principal object" of government was "to acquire a new security for...the enjoyment or acquisition of [rights] which we were previously entitled by the immediate gift...of our all-wise and all-beneficent Creator." 9 Thomas Jefferson affirmed that government "is to declare and enforce only our natural rights and duties, and to take none of them from us." 10

This is the third tenet producing American Exceptionalism: government must ensure that every individual has the opportunity to exercise his or her God-given rights-all of them.

4. There Is a Fixed Moral Law

"...to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them..."

This phrase in the Declaration was taken from the most popular law book in the Founding Era: William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England. This phrase recognizes that God Himself has given moral laws, and that they are visible not only in what He has created but that He also gave a second revelation of those moral laws through His written Word, the Bible. 11 Significantly, these two revelations always agree with and never contradict each other.

For example, abortion is wrong under God's revealed Word, and it is also wrong under God's laws of nature. Consider: there is no species in nature that kills its young while still in the womb, so abortion is a violation of both "the laws of nature" and "the laws of nature's God"-thus, it is a violation of God's Moral Law.

The same is true with homosexuality. Homosexuality is condemned in God's written Word, and while occasions of homosexuality do exist in nature, they are always aberrations rather than the norm. Homosexuality is therefore a violation of "the laws of nature and of nature's God"-a violation of God's Moral Law. There are many other examples.

Recognizing that there is an absolute Moral Law to which even civil authorities are subject is the fourth tenet that produces limited government and American Exceptionalism. (For more about the Moral Law, see the commentary accompanying Ex 20.)

5. The Consent of the Governed

"...governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The "consent of the governed" is also historically known as Social Compact theory, under which citizens surrender some of their individual autonomy in order to create a stable and civilized society. Social Compact Laws, or those resulting from "the consent of the governed," are those that fall below the level of the Moral Law.

The Moral Law is God's declaration of what is absolutely right and wrong, but Social Compact Law is merely society's agreement upon what is relatively right and wrong and involves things such as speed limits, municipal ordinances, parking regulations, etc.

The measurement for the "consent of the governed" was given by George Washington:

The fundamental principle of our Constitution...enjoins [requires] that the will of the majority shall prevail. 12

Thomas Jefferson agreed:

The law of the majority is the natural law of every society. 13

But the "will of the majority" or the "consent of the governed" is irrelevant when it comes to the Moral Law or inalienable rights. Even if it is unanimous among the people that rape or arson should not be a

crime, it will continue to be so, for each is against "the laws of nature and of nature's God." And even if it is unanimous that the rights of religious conscience should no longer be protected, they still must be, for government exists to secure to every individual his inalienable rights.

Preserving the "will of the majority" on issues beneath the level of the Moral Law and inalienable rights is the fifth tenet that secures American Exceptionalism.

6. Alter, Abolish, or Create a New Government

"That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government."

Because good government is to safeguard the previous five tenets, if it fails to do so, the people have a right to modify their government so that it will secure these elements, and if necessary, the people can even completely replace their government. But in so doing, they must never be without government, for not only would that be anarchy (which is condemned in the Scriptures), but the Bible also makes clear that civil government is an institution established by God Himself under which individuals are to live. (For more on this, see the commentary accompanying Ex 18:21 and Rom 13.)

Concerning this sixth tenet, James Madison affirmed:

That the people have an indubitable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to reform or change their government whenever it be found adverse or inadequate to the purposes of its institution. 14 One of the many means by which the people can make either small or large changes to their government is set forth in Article V of the Constitution, which allows the people to amend the Constitution as they think necessary or even create so many changes that a completely new government is established.

As Samuel Adams affirmed:

The people alone have an incontestable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to institute government and to reform, alter, or totally change the same when their protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness require it. And the federal Constitution, according to the mode prescribed therein, has already undergone such amendments in several parts of it as from experience has been judged necessary. 15

This, then, is the sixth tenet undergirding American Exceptionalism: ensuring that the people, under God, retain full power over their government and its officials.

American Exceptionalism is the by-product of these six major governing principles-principles that resulted in the recognition and establishment of God-given inalienable rights, individualism, limited government, religious toleration, free-market economics, full republicanism, separation of powers, checks and balances, an educated and virtuous citizenry, and other distinctive elements. As a result of these unique ideas, President Calvin Coolidge accurately observed:

To live under the American Constitution is the greatest political privilege that was ever accorded to the human race. 16

Footnotes:

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840), Vol. II, pp. 36-37.

2 George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Ferdinand Andrews, 1838), Vol. XII, p. 119, proclamation for a National Thanksgiving on October 3, 1789.

- 3 John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854), Vol. IX, p. 169, proclamation for a National Thanksgiving on March 23, 1798.
- 4 Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), Vol. III, pp. 320-321, "Inauguration Address," March 4, 1801.
- 5 Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. III, p. 449, "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," 1765.
- 6 John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, ed. R.T.H. Halsey (New York: The Outlook Company, 1903), p. xlii, to the Society of Fort St. David, 1768.
- 7 Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. John C. Hamilton (New York: John F. Trow, 1850), Vol. 11, p. 80, "The Farmer Refuted," February 5, 1775.
- 8 Samuel Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), Vol. I, p. 54, to John Smith, 1765.
- 9 James Wilson, *The Works of the Honourable James Wilson*, ed. Bird Wilson (Philadelphia: Lorenzo Press, 1804), Vol. II, p. 454.
- 10 Thomas Jefferson, *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies*, ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph (Charlottesville, VA: F. Carr and Co., 1829), Vol. IV, p. 278, to Francis Gilmer on June 7, 1816.
- 11 Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, Union Library, 1771), Vol. I, pp. 39, 41-42.
- 12 James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (published by Authority of Congress, 1899), Vol. I, p. 164, George Washington, from his "Sixth Annual Address" of November 19, 1794.
- 13 Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. III, p. 60, "Opinion upon the question whether the President should veto the Bill, declaring that the seat of government shall be transferred to the Potomac, in the year 1790," July 15, 1790.
- 14 James Madison, *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), Vol. V, p. 377, speech in Congress on citizenship of the United States, May 22, 1789.
- 15 Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, Vol. IV, p. 388, to the Legislature of Massachusetts on January 19, 1796.
- 16 James M. Beck, *The Constitution of the United States, 1787-1927*, ed. Edwin L. Miller and C. C. Barnes (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. viii, a letter from the White House by Calvin Coolidge, December 12, 1924.
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