

Looking for America - An understanding of who we are and what is right and wrong

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In growing from a child to an adult, we develop an understanding of who we are, how things work, and what is right and wrong. In effect, we gain a world view which frames the parameters for beliefs, perceptions, and actions. This framework becomes the standard by which we measure all things; it is the lens through which we perceive the world. It shapes our decisions and direction.

There comes the point in each person's life when you realize that the world is not perfect. What we do with that realization can become a formidable force for our character development.

Who is responsible or to blame for the imperfect world? We can blame our parents, society, a flawed education system, the government, religion, and so forth. But, unfortunately, a great deal of effort is wasted in constructing blame trees and finding someone or something to blame for society's ills.



The recognition that the world is imperfect is not unique to our generation. It is a timeless struggle to make the world a better place. Our disappointment or rage with it must not become the justification for irresponsible or destructive behavior. Instead of constructing blame trees, wouldn't it be better to plant responsibility trees beginning with ourselves? What can I do? How can I help my family? How does my family contribute to society, society to the nation, the nation to the world?

The United States of America is not perfect. Still, it has become a nation of all peoples, a

leader in advances in industry, technology, civil rights. America, in its relatively short history, became the most prosperous country in the world. People come from all over the world to live here, to find a better life. Even her harshest critics acknowledge this. I have traveled and worked in different countries and am always happy and relieved to come back home. What makes America so different?

It is an inquiry that each of us should explore. In "America," a 1968 song written by Paul Simon, a young couple is on a road trip, and the singer reflects, "I've gone to look for America." In his simple lyrics, Simon expresses a longing to understand this country. I feel that it is time to search for America again. In 1968, like today, America was rife with division, racial conflicts, questioning, and searching, especially for its young people.

The heightened sensibilities that come from living in a contentious time can awaken the yearnings for something better.



The United States of America was formed amid the Age of Enlightenment. In the writings of the Founding Fathers, you can see the influence of the thinkers of that era. The Enlightenment thinkers elucidated ground-breaking realizations that reframed the understanding of man's role in the world and the role of government. The language of the Declaration of Independence reflects this. We find this in the phrase:

"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."

These words hold significant meaning and implications. The rights of men come from their Creator, not from any institution. Simply put, every person is born with the right to live, be free, and pursue a fulfilling life. Our government should protect those rights for each person, for all people. One of the foremost Enlightenment thinkers, John Locke, recognized that each person has the intrinsic capacity to discern right from wrong. He wrote in *Why Men Reason So Poorly*:

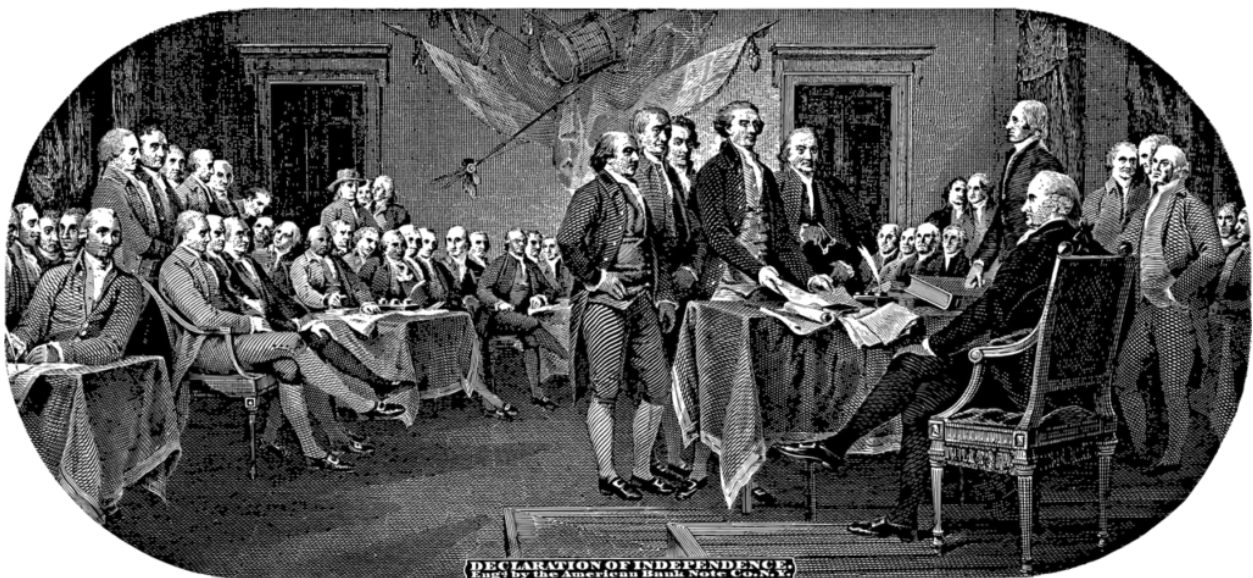
"Every man carries about him a touchstone, if he will make use of it, to distinguish substantial gold from superficial glitterings, truth from appearances. And indeed, the use and benefit of this touchstone, which is natural reason, is spoiled and lost only by assuming prejudices, overweening presumption, and narrowing our minds."

The founders sought to foster an environment that allows for the growth of the human spirit. They placed man's pursuit of his God-given, or if you prefer, nature endowed rights as the priority. They reasoned that the role of government is to protect each person's right to become a fully realized human being, a complete child of God. This is the basis for the value of each individual. The conceptual framework of the founders places the onus on each person's rights and responsibilities. It is not the role of the government to dictate or define right and wrong but to nurture and protect those rights.

Has the American experiment been perfect? It has not. The growing pains have been at times severe. During the Civil War, the nation almost splintered and collapsed. Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address:

"Our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and dedicated, can long endure."

The "American experiment" has been tested in every generation, and by extension, so has the human experience.



The Founding Fathers had the presence of mind to realize they had the historic opportunity to shape a new kind of nation. The nation they founded has influenced the world. Their work is far from complete. Doesn't every generation have the opportunity to shape and steer history? Rather than decry past flaws, isn't it more effective to learn from the past, both the good and the bad, and give our best in the time we have to make it better? What shall we do with our time? I'm looking for America, not only what it is and has been but, more importantly, what it can become.