

"American Values for Our Time"

a lecture by

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Summary

Our time is one of unprecedented change—in the economy, mass media, the structure of the family. Globalization puts unrelenting pressure on small and medium-sized businesses, on wages and our standard of living, and protection of the environment. Corporate mass media “entertains” us with gratuitous violence and sex, and targets us and even our children with pervasive advertising—all aimed to get us to define ourselves as “consumers”. The extended family has been destroyed by physical mobility, and the nuclear family is under great stress. A majority of American children are growing up in single parent families. 60% of children do not eat the evening meal with their parents.

Amid such changes and pressures, it's hard to maintain our moral bearings. But we can and must do that if we are to fulfill our responsibility as American citizens, and if democratic government is to serve our vital interests in coping with today's world.

Six Founding Values of our nation can provide a moral compass for our time: Citizenship, Community, Checks & Balances, Conservation, Conscience, and Common Ground.

The ‘we’ embodied in and central to the concepts of citizenship & community is being overwhelmed by the “I” of consumerism, a product of “market values”. Deregulation and privatization—of utilities, prisons, public employment, schools, military functions,—reflect an ideology that holds that “private is good, public is bad”.

As Theodore Roosevelt understood, the concept of checks & balances is vital not only for government, but for business enterprise as well. The combination of globalized economics and the power of major corporations has upset the balance created during the past 100 years between large and small business, labor and environmental conservation. Today's global trade rules work for major corporations, but not for huge segments of American society

Conservation of the natural world on which we all depend has been central to our well-being since Jefferson wrote “the spontaneous energies of the earth are a gift of nature.” The assertion that conservation of the environment and a healthy economy are incompatible is false. The undeniable truth is that for humans to flourish, we need an economy that works for people **and** for the land, water and air all life depends on.

The American conscience has contributed to the nobility of human history: It is committed to “establishing justice” – the first purpose of government cited in the Preamble to the US Constitution. It is a struggle for each generation, but the proudest moments in American history are found there. The abolition of slavery, adoption of the 14th Amendment, mandating free universal public education, abolition of child labor, assuring women's right to vote and workers' rights to organize, establishment of Social Security and Medicare, forging of the anti-Fascist WWII coalition, outlawing segregation and voting discrimination, passage of Title IX and the Americans with Disabilities Act. All were achieved over strong, sometimes violent opposition. All represent our best as a nation.

Common Ground: The above Founding Values are ones that have stood the test of time, ones which we can use to get and hold our bearings. They have inspired people around the world, earning America international good will—good will that is vital to our national security, and vital to our sense of integrity and honorable purpose as a nation. This is the common ground on which we can stand.

Documents

Declaration of Independence

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 to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Constitution of the United States of America

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, **establish Justice**, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, **promote the general Welfare**, and **secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity**, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Quotes

Thomas Jefferson

from: Reply to Danbury Baptists, 1802

[Man] has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

Abraham Lincoln

from: Second Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. **As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.**

from: The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln edited by Roy P. Basler, Volume VII, "Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland" (April 18, 1864), p. 301-302.

We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others, the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name – liberty."

Gifford Pinchot

from: The Fight for Conservation, Chapter IV: Principles of Conservation

The conservation idea covers a wider range than the field of natural resources alone. Conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time. One of its great contributions is just this, that it has added to the worn and well-known phrase, "the greatest good to the greatest number," the additional words "for the longest time," thus recognizing that this nation of ours must be made to endure as the best possible home for all its people.

from: Breaking New Ground, 1947.

Concentrated wealth can only maintain its stranglehold over the general welfare if it can get the people to accept its exactions, and especially the methods by which it gets its power, as normal and natural. For the people can destroy monopoly at any time they choose to exert themselves.

The monopolists must accustom people to their tyranny by a constant stream of praise for great corporations and free enterprise according to their own interpretation, as well as discrediting of liberal movements and leaders--all of which is facilitated by their ever increasing control of the press, the radio and other news outlets.

Dwight David Eisenhower

from: Letter to his brother, Milton, 1943

...good, old-fashioned patriotism—just that sense of loyalty and obligation to the community that is necessary to the preservation of all the privileges and rights that the community guarantees.

Martin Luther King

from: Speech to Clergy & Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, April 4, 1967

I am convinced ... we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a people-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

For additional information:

Official documents:

Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/help/constRedir.html>

FindLaw: <http://www.findlaw.com/casecode/intro.html>

Jefferson info: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/index.html>

Lincoln info: <http://www.lincoln.org.al/index.htm>

Pinchot info: <http://www.fs.fed.us/na/gt/local-links/historical-info/gifford/gifford.shtml>

King info: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>