‘We Need a New American Revolution’

Q&A with Matthew Spalding on His Book,

*We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*

Matthew Spalding, a constitutional scholar at The Heritage Foundation ([heritage.org](http://heritage.org)), fields questions at the heart of his new book, “*We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*” (ISI Books, Nov. 2, 2009).

Why do principles matter?

The United States of America is unique in that universal principles of liberty are the foundation of our system of government and political culture. To this day, so many years after the American Revolution, these principles—proclaimed by the Founders in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the Constitution—still define us as a nation. They inspire us as a people.

These principles are responsible for creating a prosperous and just nation unlike any other, a nation that is a powerful beacon to all those who strive for freedom. These principles are the unchanging standards that inform and guide us in changing times.

So what are America's principles?

My book, “We Still Hold These Truths,” focuses on 10 core principles that make up our national creed and common purpose:

- **Liberty** is the grand, overarching theme of our history.
- **Equality, natural rights** and **consent of the governed** are the foundational principles that set the compass of our politics.
- **Private property** is the basis of economic liberty.
- **Religious freedom** in thought and practice is a fundamental expression of American liberty.
- **The rule of law** and **limited government** define the political framework that undergirds our liberty.
- These eight principles culminate in **self-government**, in both the political sense of republican governance and the moral sense of governing ourselves.
• And, lastly, **independence** reflects the meaning of America’s principles in world affairs.

**What happened to these principles?**

Our core principles came under direct assault at the start of the last century, when so-called progressive thinkers sought to refound America according to ideas alien to those of the Founders. The “progressives” repudiated the Founders’ principles, holding that there are no self-evident truths—in the Declaration of Independence or elsewhere—but only relative values. They contended there are no permanent rights with which man is endowed, but only changing rights held at the indulgence of government. In the progressive view, we must be governed by a “living” Constitution that endlessly evolves and grows with the times.

This debate is not one between different Founding Fathers or different interpretations of the American founding, but between America and those who strive to fundamentally remake America according to this vision.

**What’s going on today?**

The progressives’ view of the United States has driven American politics and the rise of big government in the 20th century. Today, this view dominates the academy, the media, intellectual elites and significant portions of the leadership in both major political parties.

The Progressive Movement, first under a Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt and then a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, set forth the political platform for modern liberalism. “Progress” to them means a new form of government able to engineer a better society.

This system would assure equal outcomes and redistribute wealth through a distant, patronizing welfare state that regulates more and more of the economy, politics and society. President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society were grand steps to achieve this platform.

We are at the beginning of a more aggressive move in this direction—but the ideas behind it are more than a century old.

**Where is America headed?**

The path we are following is turning America into a European-style, centralized state. We’re increasingly stifled by a highly regulated economy, nationalized industries and socialized health care. We’re increasingly ruled more by bureaucrats than elected legislatures, bureaucrats with more allegiance to international organizations than their own country.

This isn’t progress, it’s the revival of a failed, undemocratic and illiberal form of statism. More than 170 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville warned of the rise of a new despotism that would reduce a self-governing people to “nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.”
Is it too late for the nation to recover?

No. We don’t need to remake America, or discover new and untested principles. Despite constant criticism and scorn by academic elites, political leaders and the popular media, most Americans still believe in the Founders’ principles. And they’re deeply concerned—witness recent town hall meetings and expanding “tea parties”—about turning away from those principles.

The change we need is a great renewal of the foundational principles and limited constitutional government that are the true roots of America’s greatness. In a world of moral confusion, of arbitrary and unlimited government, the American founding is our best access to permanent truths. It’s our best ground from which to launch a radical questioning of the progressive project for America.

What do these American principles mean today?

Restoring our principles doesn’t mean going back to the 18th century. It doesn’t mean we solve today’s problems by formulaic appeals to abstract principles. I’m talking about applying these principles to the problems of our day:

Do Americans have a fundamental right to government-provided health care? What does it mean to be truly equal before the law? Don’t laws promulgated by unelected bureaucrats violate the consent of the governed? Does religious liberty mean the government can impose a secular culture?

Here’s what “We Still Hold These Truths” asserts: Property is still the necessary foundation of free markets and widespread prosperity. The rule of law still means everyone—especially judges—must act within the confines of constitutional government.

Self-government requires a radical decentralization of government. It requires a vast expansion of the authority of family, community, schools, churches and the marketplace. Independence means a commitment to national sovereignty and defense. It means a renewed confidence in upholding America’s principles in the world.

So what do we do now?

We need a new American revolution. Not an overthrow of the government, not a great social upheaval, but a reapplication of America’s core principles to the great questions of our day.

We must rediscover these principles as a people, teach these principles in our schools and give voice to these principles in our politics and public square. We must recover a popular understanding of constitutional government. We must develop new leaders who understand those terms and will abide by the Constitution. America’s principles must become again, as Jefferson said, “an expression of the American mind.”

America’s principles have always provided the basis for our political consensus and identity. They can do that again. These principles can be the source of a new American conservatism that reminds economic conservatives that morality and self-reliance are essential to
limited government, reminds cultural conservatives that unlimited government threatens moral self-government, and reminds national-security conservatives that energetic but responsible government is the key to safety at home and prominence in the world.

This isn’t just about new policy prescriptions. Our purpose must be to conserve the principles of liberty and make them the central idea of our politics once again.

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