

American Political Thought

Essay I – Due Friday, October 20

In a 10-12+ page essay, with your name only in the upper right-hand corner, double-spaced, written within normal margins, in 12 point Times New Roman font, answer *one* of the questions below. Be sure to support your claims with quotes from the texts and proper citations.

Option 1 – The American Republic: Classical or Liberal – or Can it be Both?

Some of the American Founders insisted that the basis for liberty was the same place it had always been since the ancient world: the virtues in the human heart. No amount of rights, however “natural” or fundamental, could be experienced by a people too vicious to be free. Indeed, those who could not be free from their own vices deserved tyranny; the free were only those who had learned to govern themselves personally, with their reason ruling over their passions, and practiced in the virtues. The task of achieving liberty was made easier for Americans because of the presence of Christianity: all of the strenuous efforts of ancient Spartans and Romans would be far more possible because of the vigorous faith of common citizens, and supernatural help from “the Almighty.” But other Founders had a different view: the genius of American liberty was in its identification of natural rights that people had regardless of character, and a constitutional government that could protect those rights even if they were depraved. In fact, it was not virtue and religion that made the new republic great, but man’s baser qualities: the selfish desire for property would produce abundance in “manufactures.” Similarly, the desire for ambition – formerly the strongest vice of tyrants – would become the driving force in a system of checks and balances. Indeed, the worst things in human nature could be *used* to ensure the common good – but only if society encouraged those things. So what do these conflicting views mean for the American Founding – and for the republic today? Is there a connection between the virtuous classical republic and the amoral liberal republic? Or must we understand ourselves in terms of one or the other? Consider the writings of two of the following Founders – George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Option 2 – What is the Root of Moral Truth: Individual Conscience or Natural Right?

Henry David Thoreau first introduced what has today become an all-American moral code: trust only yourself. His teaching appeared in reaction to the levelling effects of mass-democracy on one hand, and the cold greed of capitalism on the other; individualism needed to find a heart, and that meant individual persons seizing upon a single moral cause and devoting themselves to it completely. In practice, pure conscience dictated opposition to slavery, and the requirement that people avoid even the most miniscule taxes that might support it. Civil disobedience required such principles opposition, not only for the sake of doing right, but for making worthy moral choices that were untainted by outside influence – a choice that reached its greatest certainty in breaking the law and landing oneself in prison. To allow society or tradition influence that moral sense was to corrupt it – and to look to government was the gravest error. Abraham Lincoln, however, found the most meaningful source of moral truth in natural justice that was embedded in the regime by the American Founding. It did not exist in the realms of abstract philosophy, nor was it in the sheer power of individual conscience. It was found in the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, which was at the heart of the American Union. Hence, the wrongness of slavery did not come from the deep conscience of the enlightened few, but from the purest logic, and political truths that all Americans could share. So who was right? Is our sense of right and wrong rooted in the sublime and unexplainable dictates of the individual heart? Or do we find them in a view of natural law, and the logic of the cosmos? Are the two necessarily opposed, or might one better inform the other?

Option 3 – Who Read the Founders Correctly: Abraham Lincoln or Stephen Douglas?

For Stephen Douglas, the Founders' intent was to leave even the most pressing moral questions where they belonged: to human choice, exercised through democratic institutions. That was the more accurate definition of liberty, known as "popular sovereignty." It was foolish to think that any principle, no matter how "self-evident," should be forced on an unwilling people; the Founders knew this, and intended for them to exercise self-government through their democratic institutions, and frame constitutions that fit them best. It was not pro- or anti-slavery, Douglas claimed; it was simply in favor of choices freely made by self-governing people – and to say otherwise was to incite a civil war. For Abraham Lincoln, however, slavery was not only a defiance of the "laws of nature," but a rejection of the American proposition in the Declaration of Independence. Slavery violated the requirement that good government exist "by the consent of the governed"; it deprived slaves of their natural rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; and, above all, it ignored the "self-evident truth" of human equality, which was the only true basis for liberty. The best reason to end slavery was therefore in the name of Jefferson and the Founders – perhaps not what they *did* (because they failed to end slavery) but certainly what they *said*. Lincoln not only stood by Jefferson's vision, but insisted that there was a certain consequence of rejecting it: the eventual nationalization of slavery as western states joined the Union. So was Lincoln right to let a single philosophic idea cost the nation so dearly? Would it be wiser to leave such moral questions about what counts as a person up to human choice, as Douglas saw it, rather than appealing to some Lincolnian law of nature?

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Essay II – Due Friday, December 1

In a 8-10+ page essay, with your name only in the upper right-hand corner, double-spaced, with a title, written within normal margins, in 12 point Times New Roman font, address a dispute over one of the topics below:

Argument. Be sure to support your claims with quotes from the texts, and structure your argument this way:

- **Introduction.** Explain the importance of the topic, and discuss what two scholars have said. State your thesis.
- **Opposition.** Explain the position you *disagree* with, based on supporting quotes and interpretation of the argument from one political thinker.
- **Second View.** Explain the position you *agree* with, based on supporting quotes and interpretation of the argument from one political thinker.
- **Conclusion.** Sum everything up.

Topics. Here are some possible topics.

- **Conservatism.** What is American conservatism? What is its relationship with liberalism? What exactly do Americans conserve? (Founders, Lincoln, Sumner, Kirk)
- **Democracy.** What is the nature of American democracy? What is its role in American republicanism? What makes democracy flourish? (Founders, Thoreau, Douglas vs. Lincoln, Hayden, Kirk)
- **Equality.** What is the American idea of human equality? In what sense are we equal? In what sense are we not? (All)
- **Exceptionalism.** In what sense do American political thinkers regard the U.S. as “exceptional”? What factors make it exceptional? How did the view of exceptionalism change over time? (All)
- **History and Progress.** What is the American view of history? In what sense are we progressive? How do we understand social evolution? (Founders, Calhoun, Sumner, Roosevelt, Sanger, Hayden, Kirk)
- **Liberalism.** What is American liberalism? How does it differ from the European liberal tradition? How does it change through the course of American history? (All)
- **Marriage and Family.** What is the purpose of marriage? What is the nature of the family? What does it mean for American democracy? (Founders, Sumner, Sanger, Stanton)
- **National Identity.** What is an American? How should we understand our identity as American citizens? What should be our role in the regime? (Founders, Lincoln, Sanger, Roosevelt, DuBois, Hayden, Kirk)
- **Religion.** What is the place of religion in American life? What is its influence on politics, for better or worse? How does the role of religion change over time? (Founders, DuBois, Kirk)
- **Space.** What is the role of open space in American thought? What effect does it have on American society and culture? (Founders, Thoreau, Roosevelt)