

# An Idea Called America

Michael Hartoonian, Richard Van Scotter, and William E. White

*Democracy degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone.*

*The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories.*

—Thomas Jefferson  
(1782, Notes on the State of Virginia)

**Our citizenship is based on an idea we call America.** America evolved out of the principles of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, suggesting that individuals could govern themselves and that people were “endowed” with “unalienable rights” such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these principles, Americans would continue to work on forming a more perfect Union, by establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing liberty into the future. Thus, “U.S. citizenship” means embracing these principles, which when taken together, we call America.

Further, we believe that the idea of America must be sustained through debate. This view of our citizenship begs three central questions:

1. How does debate sustain and energize an idea called America?
2. What is the nature of such a powerful idea?
3. How should the debate or argument be framed?

To begin with, the debate or argument is over whether or not a dynamic and diverse republic can be developed and sustained on a grand scale. At a deeper level, however, the debate, launched at the time of the American Revolution, and carried into the present by citizens’ civic discourse is over four sets of *value*

*tensions*. These tensions encompass the fundamental idea of America:<sup>1</sup>

- Law vs. Ethics
- Private Wealth vs. Common Wealth
- Freedom vs. Equality
- Unity vs. Diversity

While each value set is inherently in conflict, there also is a vital synergy between them. For example, private wealth is never fully realized, nor secure, without a robust common wealth. Likewise, our freedom is impoverished if not accompanied by a sense of equality that provides a moral infrastructure in which to encase that freedom. Similarly, our laws are never good unless guided by a higher conscience. And the quest

for cultural unity is inconsistent with democracy if it does not also recognize the rich diversity of our increasingly pluralistic society. Thus, a critical capacity of the democratic mind is the ability to embrace contradictory ideas. Without such ability we undermine the democratic principles at the core of our nation. Understanding, reconciling, and balancing these values are essential processes of democracy.

## Law and Ethics

Laws that help us govern and ethical principles that guide behavior are not always in harmony. But the dissonance and tension can lead to change, a better legal system, and a good society. The consequences hinge on how intellectually prepared we are to address such paradoxes. Important political documents and statements illustrate this discord.

The Declaration of Independence called on Americans to rise above corrupt laws and honor the moral authority residing within them, “the Powers of the Earth ... and of Nature’s God.” The founders, products of the Enlightenment, believed that the people had been vested with the power of reason, respect for the individual, ethical integrity, and discretion in government.<sup>2</sup>

In his debates that led up to the Civil War, Lincoln invoked a higher principle that superseded the then-law of the land. And a century later, in the 1960s, another great American statesman, Martin Luther King, Jr., made a similar argument during the civil rights movement.<sup>3</sup>

If law and ethics are not intentionally balanced, a great deal of mischief can be perpetrated either in the name of the law or in the name of God. Stubbornly holding to a “higher principle” or to “the law” can stall the progress of the nation. That is why statutory law and “higher law” must be in tension. Without this debate the fabric of our democracy is weakened.

### **Freedom and Equality**

Perhaps the pivotal tension throughout the history of the United States has been the debate over freedom and equality. Democracy, at its best, is a continuous struggle to balance these ideals. Our history can be read as attempts at one time to promote freedom over equality and at others to favor the reverse. Like a swinging pendulum, one value or the other seems to be more popular and persuasive during a particular cycle of history. For example, when the conventional wisdom favors freedom, the power and resources of a society tend to flow into the hands of the few. In turn, those in power develop rationales to justify this distribution in the name of merit, efficiency, and economic growth. Left unattended, this imbalance of wealth and power undermines democracy and threatens to destroy the nation.

However, when the pendulum swings, the national persuasion favors redistributing wealth in the name of compassion and economic justice. In its wake, personal freedom tends to suffer. While laws were enacted to protect workers, house the poor, and support elderly citizens, they often resulted in a heavier hand for government. It is society’s task, which is to say each citizen’s responsibility, to assure that these elements are fairly distributed.

### **Unity and Diversity**

*E Pluribus Unum*. From Latin, this means “Out of many, One.” The individual is highly prized in our society, yet a person must exist within the constraints of society—with its obligations and requirements as well as support and enrichment. To understand such is to realize what it means to become an American. The question we continually struggle to address as the nature and complexion of society changes is “What does it take to be admitted to the ‘Unum?’” George Washington, in 1790, wrote to the Hebrew Congregation in Rhode Island saying:

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.<sup>4</sup>

That is the American ideal. It is a place where diversity is recognized and celebrated while simultaneously cherishing the unity of all citizens. Realizing this ideal has been difficult. We still struggle to recognize the contributions of African Americans and Native Americans. We have even struggled to recognize these Americans as full status citizens. Many other immigrants, including Italian Americans, Irish Americans, and Asian Americans have all struggled to be accepted and recognized as Americans. Today the status of Hispanic Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, and others, in various ways, has taken center stage in our quest to more completely embrace the guiding spirit of *e pluribus unum*.

Another salient aspect of our national unity involves the diversity of values,

beliefs, and thought among citizens. The American experiment begins with the question: Is it possible to have a coherent stable culture that allows the greatest possible freedom of religious and political thought and expression?

### **Private and Common Wealth**

At the time of the American Revolution, people understood that their personal well-being was intimately connected with the welfare of the community. In effect, the concepts of private wealth and public or common wealth were finely meshed. Early Americans understood “happiness” to be a by-product of the well-lived life. It meant living beyond oneself and giving of one’s talents to make the community better. This understanding of public happiness was the rationale for calling such states as Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania *commonwealths*. In fact, the signers of the Declaration of Independence took it for granted that citizens knew the public connotation of “the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>5</sup>

The framers of the U.S. Constitution also understood that general wealth could not be created unless the people were well educated. To this end, Jefferson advocated several education plans, such as his “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” which was introduced to the Virginia Legislature in 1778.<sup>6</sup>

What we know is that developing and maintaining a commonwealth enhances the private wealth or “is good for business.” Investments in the public infrastructure help business and industry to operate more efficiently, productively, and profitably. Schools and universities; streets and highways; fire and police protection; and even parks, hospitals, libraries, and museums—all public amenities—serve to benefit firms and their employees. A robust commonwealth is dependent upon economic accomplishments, which have been attained in the United States because of the vigorous, expanding quest for private wealth by Americans that has been a driving force behind our nation’s vast economic devel-

opment. The intense private investment in business and technology has made America a land of innovators that has enriched the common good. As with law and ethics, a healthy debate between what belongs in the market and what constitutes the infrastructure sustains a healthy community and invigorates democracy.

Viewed through a cultural prism, the four value tensions reveal their many facets, nuances, and complexities. Despite our abundance, assets, advantages, and opportunities, it is not easy being an American and a democratic citizen. Sustaining a democracy requires “paying attention” and having the ability to analyze issues, confront contradictions, deal with ambiguity, suspend judgment, and ultimately make thoughtful decisions. And we are not born with this disposition or ability; it must be taught and continuously reinforced. It involves rigorous intellectual work, the willingness to engage in civic discourse, and the ability to understand and work to bring the value tensions into better balance.

### **Framing a Democratic Debate: Common vs. Private Wealth**

People in the United States have generally been, and still are, members of a prosperous society. This affluence is only as reliable as the bonds that bring us together into a social whole. The important questions for the debate over prosperity include: Why are the activities of citizen, student, parent, worker, and neighbor both private and civic? How have these activities changed over time? What is the proper balance between private and common wealth?

Historically, Americans have always been part of global commerce and political relationships. And our economic and political policies have reflected this reality. But our public policy has always been sensitive to the “middle class,” believing that the well-being and values of the middle class are necessary to a democratic society. In the nineteenth century, the federal government enhanced the middle class by giv-

ing land away to homesteaders. In the twentieth century, it provided social security, public works, and incentives such as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, better known as the G. I. Bill, to bolster the middle class and its values. There was also the growth of organized labor and the Federal Housing Administration, which made it possible for more Americans to buy their own homes. These ideas and policies became a way to better balance private and common wealth as well as freedom and equality.

### **Toward a More Prosperous Middle Class**

There is convincing evidence that for more than a decade now the middle class has been diminishing in its influence and relative size.<sup>7</sup> While much of the blame has been placed on income lag, unrealistic growth in consumer appetites, and the outsourcing of American jobs, it is becoming clearer that healthcare and education costs are making it more difficult for small businesses and many households to maintain their middle-class status. The reality of American life for many citizens is becoming more distant from the nation’s

ideals of the American Dream. Out of this context, policy debates gaining attention include: Should healthcare remain primarily in the market (private wealth) or become part of the public infrastructure (common wealth)? The lesson plan that accompanies this article offers a framework for classroom discussion of this issue.

Throughout our history there have been many debates about the identity and health of the middle class. It is strongly held that a healthy middle class is necessary to democracy. The defining attributes of the middle class include a certain level of income—often involving land ownership—a set of behaviors referred to as the “work-ethic,” and a desire to be part of the American Dream. Over the last 200 years, our government has enacted many policies as ways to protect or enhance the middle class, from making land available to citizens, to implementing a series of social safety nets like Social Security and Medicare, to educational programs for veterans. The debate on healthcare highlights the value tensions between private and common wealth and directs attention toward the means of sustaining the middle class in a market-driven economy.<sup>8</sup> It should

## **The Colonial Williamsburg History and Civics Project**

Colonial Williamsburg recently embarked on a new secondary school history and civics project based on the idea that our republic, the United States of America, is sustained and enhanced through civic discourse and debate. This debate that engages citizens and elected leaders attempts to maintain a balance between four sets of democratic values.

The authors of this article are participants in the Colonial Williamsburg History/Civics Project, in which the Social Science Education Consortium has collaborated in developing the conceptual foundation. The Project plans to provide more than 100 significant topics and case studies cutting across the scope of American history that will enable classes to access primary sources electronically and engage in the pivotal debates of American history.

The project title, *The Idea of America*, has a blue ribbon National Advisory Board, whose honorary chair is former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor.

# LESSON PLAN

## The Healthcare Debate: A Lesson Plan

While we understand that the well-being of our nation depends on all Americans being as healthy as they can, virtually every family, firm, city, state, and our nation as a whole is concerned about the cost, quality, and availability of healthcare. The resolution to this problem is so important to the sustainability of the middle class and our republic that if we don't strike a better balance between *private wealth* and *common wealth* we will lose the idea called America.

You are a member of an advisory committee established by the president. Your responsibility is to use the points and counter-points below and through debate, construct policy recommendations for the president and Congress that will strike a better balance between *common wealth* and *private wealth* as applied to healthcare. A guiding principle of your deliberations is that individuals should take responsibility for their own health through lifestyle habits, and the government should complement the individual and take responsibility for the general health of all Americans.

Digging deeper, the class could analyze the costs and benefits of any policy or action on how it contributes to improving democ-

racy through establishing a better balance between private and common wealth. Other value tensions can also be engaged. For example, how do the suggested policies contribute to advancing equality of opportunity or promoting personal freedom? In what ways do the policies enhance the moral climate of the nation and create a more ethical society? And, finally, do the resulting policies serve the diversity of the American culture while preserving unity?

The class should bear in mind that the important components of a policy statement include, but are not limited to:

1. An irresistible idea that brings harmony and synthesizes to contested issues;
2. Leadership capable of articulating the idea in a way that builds support among citizens;
3. Resources in sufficient quantities to implement the idea in different contexts; and,
4. Coalitions of citizens who understand the idea and will work toward its implementation.

POINT <i>Market emphasis (private wealth)</i>	COUNTER-POINT <i>Infrastructure emphasis (common wealth)</i>
Since people should take responsibility for their own health, and since the market can serve as an incentive, it (the market) should be better used to encourage healthy habits over unhealthy behavior through lower insurance healthcare premiums to people with healthier life styles.	Since people have trouble disciplining their own behavior relative to diet, exercise and preventive medicine, we should intervene through government regulations to secure a higher common health standard for the nation.
Through tax incentives, encourage private investments that improve the general health of the nation, such as local green or organic agriculture, education programs on medical research, and private health counseling.	Through direct government activities, provide individuals with healthier food, drugs, and useful information by increasing our healthcare infrastructure.
CEOs develop ways to encourage individuals—employers, managers, and workers alike—to be engaged in creating healthy environments in their institutions and homes.	Fund public projects rebuilding the nation's medical (hospital, clinics, information networks) infrastructure.
Lower some business taxes to encourage healthcare investments right in the firm.	Redesign a national Medicare reward system in line with personal efforts and family needs.
Offer subsidies for businesses to finance new medical research projects.	Increase the progressive nature of the income tax, using the additional revenue for universal healthcare and research.
Maintain the quality of healthcare professionals through the market forces of supply and demand, adding foreign-trained professionals to the supply.	Encourage and establish schools of nursing, medicine, and public health, thus making medical professionals more accessible to all American families and firms, regardless of income or location.
Encourage firms who establish markets in other countries to include healthcare as part of the cost of doing business as well as a strategy to enhance the health of their firm, and the host nation.	Establish funded internships for medical professionals in locations across the world to learn about alternative medicines and to serve other peoples of the world.



be clear, however, that in civic debates all four of the value tension sets are in play. Metaphorically, the value tensions are like instruments in an orchestra. At some point in the symphony, one instrument (tension) will take the lead while the other tensions play support roles. At other times two or more of the tensions will be engaged together.

In the debate to create policy on this and other issues, the dialogue needs to be civil and respectful. Debaters must be willing to submit their arguments to evidence. The methods, techniques, and models offered for conducting rational debate should be open and specific to the disciplines used. Finally, the debaters must seek diverse options while encouraging strategies to narrow choices, and articulate decisions, policies, and directed activities that move to improve the balance of the four democratic value tensions. How we work to balance the value tensions will ultimately determine the fate of the United States. 🇺🇸

#### Notes

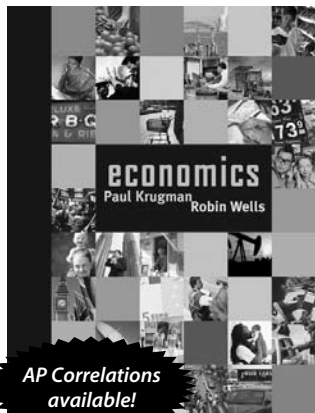
1. H. Michael Hartoonian, "A Conceptual Model for Democratic Citizenship: Arguments, Value Tensions and Identity," *Pacific-Asian Education* V, no. 15 (2003):2, 27-32.
2. Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2007): 67-73, 101.
3. See Martin Luther King Jr., "Letters from Birmingham Jail." Full text available at: [teaching-americanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=100](http://teaching-americanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=100).
4. Meacham, op. cit.
5. Hartoonian, "The Philosophical Perspective: The Role of Philosophy in the Education of Democratic Citizens," in *Social Science Perspectives on Citizenship Education*, eds. R.E. Gross and T. L. Dynneson (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1991): 195-219.
6. John P. Kaminski, *Citizen Jefferson* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1994): 27.

7. See three books by Kevin Phillips: *Boiling Point: Republicans, Democrats, and Decline of the Middle Class Prosperity* (New York: Random House, 1993): 27-46; *Arrogant Capital: Washington, Wall Street, and the Frustration of American Politics* (New York: Little Brown, 1994): 78-81; and *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002): 79-91.
8. Ray Carey, *Democratic Capitalism: The Way to a World of Peace and Plenty* (Bloomington, Ind.: Author House): 165-238.

**MICHAEL HARTOONIAN** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota and past president of NCSS. **RICHARD VAN SCOTTER** is an educator and writer living in Colorado Springs and a contributor to the media on cultural issues. **WILLIAM E. WHITE** is the executive producer and director for Educational Program Development at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

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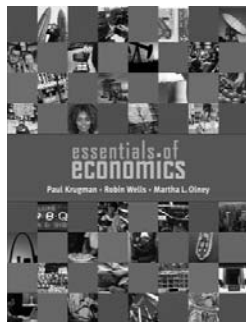
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