

"The American Proposition rests on the more traditional conviction that there are truths; that they can be known; that they must be held..."—

John Courtney Murray.

Introduction

July 4, 2026, marked the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, a milestone that invites reflection not only on the origins of the United States but also on the enduring significance of the American constitutional experiment. More than a historical commemoration, the anniversary offers an opportunity to reconsider one of the most influential political experiments in modern history and, through it, to reflect on the future of constitutional liberal democracy itself. The Declaration of 1776 marked not only the birth of a new nation but also the emergence of a constitutional model that profoundly influenced the development of liberal democracies around the world.¹

Few nations have inspired such sharply contrasting judgments as the United States. To some, it represents one of history's most successful experiments in constitutional liberty; to others, it symbolizes the contradictions and failures of modern democracy. Yet beyond these competing narratives lies a more fundamental question: **how has the American constitutional experiment endured for two and a half centuries despite a catastrophic civil war, severe economic depression, profound social conflict, and unprecedented technological transformation?**

This article argues that the durability of the American Republic cannot be explained by constitutional design alone. The Constitution established the institutional framework of liberty, but its resilience depended equally upon two less visible foundations: **social capital**—generated by families, religious communities, voluntary associations, and other intermediary institutions—and **moral capital**, the shared ethical convictions that enable a free society to govern itself before it is governed by law.²

The same perspective also offers a framework for understanding the challenges confronting liberal democracies

today. As social cohesion weakens and moral consensus erodes, constitutional institutions alone become increasingly insufficient to preserve civic trust, democratic participation, and the rule of law. The recent emergence of artificial intelligence did not create this crisis; nevertheless, it has significantly accelerated many of its underlying dynamics by reshaping communication, public discourse, and human relationships.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether the American experiment has succeeded. Rather, it is whether the moral and cultural foundations that sustained it remain sufficiently strong to preserve constitutional freedom in the twenty-first century. The answer, perhaps inevitably, is both affirmative and cautionary. America has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for institutional self-correction, yet the conditions that once made that resilience possible can no longer be taken for granted. The American experience thus becomes more than a national story: it offers a lens through which to reflect on the future of constitutional democracy itself.³

1. The Intellectual and Moral Foundations of the American Experiment

The American Republic was born in 1776, but the principles that inspired it matured over more than two millennia. The originality of the Founding Fathers consisted not so much in inventing a new political philosophy but rather in weaving together into a constitutional order, capable of reconciling liberty with law, individual rights with civic responsibility, and democracy with limited government, three enduring traditions—the classical heritage of Greece and Rome, the Judeo-Christian moral vision, and Enlightenment political thought.⁴

Understanding these foundations is essential for evaluating the American experiment after 250 years. The central questions remain those that have

accompanied Western political thought since antiquity: What is the source of political authority? Is government accountable to a higher law? Can liberty survive without virtue? Philadelphia did not invent these questions, yet it gave them one of their most enduring constitutional expressions.

The Classical Heritage

The first roots of the American experiment reach back to ancient Greece. Athens offered the earliest sustained experience of democratic self-government while also revealing democracy's fragility. Institutions alone could not preserve freedom without civic virtue and commitment to the common good.⁵

Rome transformed these insights into a more durable constitutional tradition. Above all, Cicero argued that authentic law reflects an objective moral order accessible to human reason rather than the will of rulers: "True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting."⁶

Law, therefore, precedes political power and binds rulers as well as citizens.

The Judeo-Christian Contribution

Christianity transformed the classical heritage by grounding human dignity in the belief that every person is created in the image of God.⁷ Political authority thus became morally limited, since every ruler, like every citizen, remained subject to a higher law.

St. Thomas Aquinas completed this synthesis through the doctrine of natural law, arguing that human reason can recognize universal moral principles because it participates in the Creator's eternal law.⁸ This intellectual tradition forms the indispensable background of the Declaration of Independence's appeal to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."⁹ As the Declaration's principal drafter, Thomas Jefferson gave classic expression to the convergence of

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classical philosophy and biblical faith: rights are not granted by governments but recognized because they arise from the nature of the human person and, ultimately, from the Creator.

The Enlightenment and Constitutional Liberty

The third pillar of the American experiment emerged from the political philosophy of John Locke. Building upon the natural-law tradition, Locke argued that governments exist by the consent of the governed to protect pre-existing rights and lose their legitimacy when they fundamentally violate that trust.¹⁰ Jefferson's affirmation of the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" clearly reflects this influence while placing it within a broader moral vision.

The American Founding, however,

cannot be reduced to Enlightenment liberalism alone. Its originality lay precisely in the convergence of the three traditions described above. Classical republicanism contributed civic virtue and constitutional balance; Christianity affirmed the dignity of the person and the existence of a higher moral law; the Enlightenment articulated the principles of consent, individual liberty, and limited government. Together they found institutional expression in the Constitution of 1787 through federalism, the separation of powers, and a carefully balanced system of checks and balances.¹¹

Franklin's Enduring Challenge

Benjamin Franklin captured the significance of that achievement at the close of the Constitutional Convention. As he left Independence Hall on September 17, 1787, Elizabeth

Willing Powel asked him whether the Convention had produced "a republic, or a monarchy?" Franklin's celebrated reply has become one of the defining summaries of constitutional government: "A republic, if you can keep it."¹²

Franklin understood that constitutions cannot preserve themselves. Institutions may restrain power, but they cannot create the civic virtue upon which republican government ultimately depends. Rights require responsibility, and liberty requires self-government.

More than two centuries later, Franklin's warning remains remarkably contemporary. The question is no longer whether the Founders created one of history's most influential constitutional systems. The more pressing question—and the one guiding the remainder of this essay—is whether the intellectual, moral, and cultural foundations that once sustained the American experiment remain sufficiently strong to preserve it in the twenty-first century.

2. America as a Laboratory of Democratic Renewal

The history of the United States demonstrates that constitutional democracy is never a finished achievement but an ongoing process of renewal. The resilience of the American experiment has depended not only on constitutional institutions but also on the capacity of society to recover its founding principles during periods of profound crisis. Franklin's warning that a republic must be "kept" has repeatedly found confirmation throughout American history.¹³

The Civil War constituted the Republic's greatest trial. More Americans died between 1861 and 1865 than in all subsequent wars combined. The conflict exposed the contradiction between the universal principles proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and the persistence of slavery. Thomas Jefferson himself, despite affirming that "all men are created equal," remained unable to resolve that contradiction in his own lifetime. Yet the abolition of slavery and the preservation of the Union proved an extraordinary capacity within the US for constitutional self-correction.¹⁴

A century later, the Civil Rights Movement again appealed not to revolutionary principles but to the nation's constitutional and moral inheritance. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin



Luther King Jr. invoked the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas in arguing that "an unjust law is no law at all."¹⁵ By grounding civil disobedience in both constitutional ideals and natural law, King showed that democratic renewal often depends upon recovering the principles on which democracy itself was founded rather than abandoning them.

What enabled the American constitutional order to survive such crises? Political institutions alone cannot explain this resilience. Aristotle had already observed that stable political communities ultimately depend upon a broad and virtuous middle class capable of sustaining the common good.¹⁶ Tocqueville reached a similar conclusion during his travels through the United States, attributing the strength of American democracy not primarily to its Constitution but to

the vitality of its families, churches, local communities, and voluntary associations.¹⁷ Catholic Social Teaching later expressed the same intuition through the principle of subsidiarity, while the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, whose reflections on the "American Proposition" profoundly shaped Catholic thought on constitutional democracy, argued that constitutional democracy ultimately rests upon a moral consensus generated by civil society rather than by political institutions alone.¹⁸

Modern sociology has largely confirmed these insights. Robert Bellah described this shared ethical inheritance as America's "civil religion," a public moral tradition capable of uniting citizens of different religious convictions around common civic ideals.¹⁹ More recently, Robert Putnam documented the progressive decline of precisely those intermediary

institutions that once generated social trust and civic engagement. His influential study *Bowling Alone* showed that participation in voluntary associations, religious communities, and civic organizations has steadily diminished during recent decades, weakening the social capital upon which democratic life depends.²⁰

The American experience therefore suggests that constitutional liberty is preserved not only by institutions but also by the moral and social fabric that sustains them. When intermediary institutions prosper, democracy possesses the capacity to renew itself. When they decline, constitutional structures become increasingly fragile. This transition provides the key to understanding the new challenges confronting not only the United States but liberal democracies more generally.



3. New Challenges to Constitutional Democracy

The greatest challenges confronting the American experiment today differ fundamentally from those it successfully overcame in the past. Earlier crises—civil war, economic depression, or the struggle for civil rights—tested the Republic from within while leaving largely intact the moral and cultural foundations that sustained constitutional life. **The contemporary crisis is different** because it affects those very foundations. It concerns not simply political institutions but the shared assumptions that make constitutional democracy possible.

The gradual erosion of social and moral capital has weakened the intermediary institutions that once connected individuals to the common good. Families have become more fragile, participation in religious communities and voluntary associations has declined, and a growing culture of individualism has reduced the capacity to generate the trust and civic responsibility upon which democratic life depends. As Robert Putnam demonstrated, the decline of these institutions represents not merely a sociological change but a transformation in the conditions that sustain democracy itself.²¹

This cultural transformation has also **altered the relationship between morality and law**. Where societies once relied upon broadly shared ethical convictions, they increasingly depend upon legal regulation to preserve public order. As common moral norms weaken, legislation inevitably expands in an effort to regulate conduct once guided by custom, personal responsibility, or community expectations. Harvey Silverglate illustrates this phenomenon in *Three Felonies a Day*, arguing that the proliferation of criminal statutes has become so extensive that ordinary citizens may unknowingly violate criminal provisions in the course of everyday life.²² The United States consequently possesses both the world's largest incarcerated population in absolute terms and by far the highest incarceration rate among constitutional liberal democracies, ranking globally just behind a small number of countries such as El Salvador and Cuba.²³ Law, increasingly and excessively, compensates for the decline of culture.

This development reflects a broader philosophical transformation. Nietzsche's famous proclamation that "God is dead" anticipated not simply the decline of religious belief but the difficulty of sustaining a common moral order once transcendent foundations disappear.²⁴ Twentieth-century thinkers such as Augusto Del Noce, Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas likewise warned that democratic societies cannot indefinitely preserve freedom while eroding the ethical traditions from which that freedom emerged. Catholic Social Teaching has expressed the same concern by insisting that democracy requires objective moral principles and a correct understanding of the dignity of the human person.²⁵

Artificial Intelligence has not created these tendencies, but it has accelerated them. Digital technologies increasingly mediate human relationships, public discourse, and access to knowledge, while algorithmic communication encourages fragmentation, ideological polarization, and informational isolation. The result is not only a technological transformation but an anthropological one, affecting the very capacity for dialogue, trust, and shared meaning upon which democratic life depends.

For this reason, the American experience transcends national boundaries. The weakening of social cohesion, the crisis of shared moral reference points, and the growing dependence upon technological mediation characterize many constitutional democracies. Pope Leo XIV has similarly observed that the contemporary international order is witnessing a progressive weakening of multilateral cooperation and diplomacy in favor of increasingly fragmented forms of geopolitical competition.²⁶ The challenges facing the United States therefore anticipate broader questions confronting liberal democracies throughout the world.

Ultimately, the future of constitutional democracy will depend less upon constitutional revision than upon the renewal of the moral and cultural foundations that first made constitutional liberty possible.

Conclusion

The questions raised at the beginning of this essay now admit a clearer answer. The American constitutional experiment has endured for 250 years not simply

because of the wisdom of its institutional design but because constitutional institutions were sustained by a rich fabric of **social capital** and **moral capital**. The Constitution established the framework of liberty; intermediary institutions, shared moral convictions, and civic responsibility enabled that framework to endure through civil war, economic crisis, and profound social transformation.

Today, however, the greatest challenge to constitutional democracy no longer lies primarily in institutional design but in the gradual erosion of the cultural and ethical foundations upon which free institutions ultimately depend. The decline of intermediary institutions, the fragmentation of shared moral reference points, and the growing influence of technologies that reshape human relationships and public discourse have created an unprecedented anthropological challenge. Artificial Intelligence did not originate this transformation, but it has accelerated many of its most significant consequences.

For this reason, the American experience possesses significance far beyond the United States. Many constitutional democracies now confront similar dynamics: declining civic participation, weakening social cohesion, increasing political polarization, legislative expansion, and growing uncertainty about the moral foundations of democratic life. The American experiment therefore remains a valuable laboratory—not because it offers ready-made solutions, but because it illustrates both the strengths that enable constitutional systems to endure and the conditions under which they become vulnerable.

The coincidence of the United States' two hundred and fiftieth anniversary with the election of **Pope Leo XIV**, the first American-born Pontiff, offers a symbolic reminder of this broader perspective. In *Magnifica Humanitas*, the Pope argues that the contemporary crisis is ultimately anthropological before it is political or technological. His appeal for renewed dialogue, solidarity, and the recovery of the intrinsic dignity of every human person complements the central argument of this article: constitutional democracy ultimately depends upon a culture capable of sustaining the moral truths on which freedom itself rests.²⁷

Benjamin Franklin's celebrated warning "*A republic, if you can keep it*" therefore remains as relevant today as it was in 1787. Keeping the Republic is not simply a matter of preserving constitutional structures; it requires continually renewing social trust, moral responsibility, and the shared commitment to truth that first made constitutional liberty possible.

The future of liberal democracy, in America and elsewhere, will ultimately depend less upon constitutional reform than upon the capacity of free societies to renew the moral and cultural foundations that sustain both democratic institutions and the dignity of the human person.²⁸

NOTES

1. *The Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia, July 4, 1776), Preamble.
2. On the concepts of social capital and moral capital, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 18–24;
3. Benjamin Franklin's celebrated response, "A republic, if you can keep it," has become an enduring symbol of the responsibility required to preserve constitutional government. See James McHenry, "Notes of a Conversation with Benjamin Franklin," September 18, 1787, in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, rev. ed., 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 3:85–86.
4. For the intellectual foundations of the American Founding, see Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, ed. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
5. Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. III, chaps. 6–7, and bk. IV, chap. 11; see also Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).
6. Cicero, *De Republica* III.22 (33), in *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, ed. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68.
7. Genesis 1:26–27; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), nos. 11–13.
8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, qq. 90–94, especially q. 91, aa. 1–2, and q. 94, a. 2.
9. *The Declaration of Independence*, Preamble. Jefferson's reference to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" reflects the convergence of the classical natural-law tradition and the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human person that profoundly influenced eighteenth-century political thought.



10. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Second Treatise, §§4–15, 87–95, 134–42, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
11. James Madison, *The Federalist No. 51*, in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 319–23. On the constitutional system of checks and balances, see also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 446–67.
12. James McHenry, "Notes of a Conversation with Benjamin Franklin," September 18, 1787, in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, rev. ed., 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 3:85–86. Although historians debate the precise wording, Franklin's reply faithfully expresses the constitutional responsibility entrusted to every generation.
13. On the Civil War as the defining constitutional crisis of the American Republic, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Allen C. Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
14. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVIII, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 264–70. On Jefferson's enduring contradiction regarding slavery, see Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 169–207.
15. Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 289–302. King explicitly invokes both St. Augustine ("An unjust law is no law at all") and St. Thomas Aquinas in grounding civil disobedience within the natural-law tradition.
16. Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. IV, chap. 11 (1295b35–1296a10), trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Aristotle argues that the stability of constitutional government depends largely upon the presence of a broad and virtuous middle class.
17. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 275–82, 489–92. Tocqueville repeatedly attributes the vitality of American democracy to local self-government, religion, voluntary associations, and the habits of civic participation.
18. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1931), nos. 79–80; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 48–49; John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 37–58. Murray argues that constitutional democracy ultimately depends upon a public moral consensus sustained by civil society rather than by governmental coercion alone.
19. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 143–69. See also Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21.
20. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 63–115, 183–287. Putnam documents the long-term decline of civic participation, voluntary associations, and interpersonal trust, arguing that this erosion of social capital represents one of the principal challenges confronting American democracy.
21. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 183–287. Putnam argues that the decline of civic participation, interpersonal trust, and intermediary institutions represents a structural weakening of the social capital upon which democratic societies depend.
22. Harvey A. Silverglate, *Three Felonies a Day: How the Feds Target the Innocent* (New York: Encounter Books, 2011), 1–7, 285–310. Silverglate argues that the proliferation of federal criminal statutes has become so extensive that ordinary citizens may unknowingly violate criminal provisions in the course of everyday life, illustrating the growing tendency to substitute legal regulation for shared moral norms.
23. Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, *World Prison Brief* (Birkbeck, University of London), <https://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief> (accessed July 2026); Roy Walmsley and Helen Fair, *World Prison Population List*, 14th ed. (London: Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2024). Comparative data consistently show that the United States has the world's largest incarcerated population in absolute numbers and one of the highest incarceration rates globally, surpassed only by a small number of countries—including El Salvador and Cuba—and by far the highest among constitutional liberal democracies.
24. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §125 ("The Madman"); see also *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" symbolizes the collapse of a shared transcendent moral horizon rather than a merely theological claim.
25. Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), nos. 34–42. Although differing in philosophical perspective, these authors converge in warning that democratic societies cannot indefinitely preserve freedom while eroding the moral and cultural traditions upon which that freedom historically developed.
26. Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2026), esp. concluding paragraphs. The encyclical sustains that the contemporary crisis is fundamentally anthropological and calls for renewed dialogue, solidarity, and the strengthening of multilateral cooperation in response to growing technological and geopolitical fragmentation.
27. Ibid. See especially the concluding appeal for an authentic humanism capable of integrating technological progress with the inviolable dignity of the human person and the common good.
28. Benjamin Franklin's warning that a republic must be continually "kept" provides an appropriate conclusion to the American constitutional tradition. See James McHenry, "Notes of a Conversation with Benjamin Franklin," in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, rev. ed., 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 3:85–86. On the broader relationship between constitutional government and moral consensus, see John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 37–58.