



FIRST PRINCIPLES Film Series

TEACHER'S GUIDE



First Principles Film Series

At the center of this country's cultural crisis is a crisis of memory: The most powerful forces in society are either ignoring the remarkable history of the United States or are attempting to rewrite and pervert this history in the pursuit of a radical political and social agenda. Never before has the American Founding, and its historical significance to Western civilization, come under such sustained attack. The First Principles film series speaks to this crisis moment. The series is intended to remind all Americans, especially young people, that a thorough and honest knowledge of our history is essential if we hope to promote a more just, virtuous, and democratic society. To view the film series, click on [this link](#).



EPISODE 1

Introduction: Why Future Leaders Must Understand the Past

America faces an assault not only on the legitimacy of the American Founding, but on the classical Christian tradition from which it emerged. This episode of the First Principles film series explores some of the great achievements of the West, such as the principle of freedom of conscience in the pursuit of truth.

KEY IDEAS

- We study the history of Western civilization so that we may learn the truths, warnings, and lessons of this history. As the Roman historian Titus Livius (59 BC–17 AD) said: “The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings: fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.”
- The United States did not emerge from a vacuum. We, as Americans, owe a tremendous debt to the thinkers, the writers, the artists, and the activists who came before us—the trailblazers who built and sustained Western civilization throughout the centuries.
- Famed Greek philosopher Socrates was condemned for insulting the gods and “corrupting the youth” of Athens. On which grounds? He was teaching people to think for themselves. Socrates chose death—he drank the hemlock—because he was willing to die for the freedom to speak his mind in the pursuit of truth. In other words, Socrates defended the principle of freedom of conscience. This idea has been one of the engines of change in the history of the world. It was pioneered in the West, while being ignored by virtually the rest of the ancient world.
- The American Founders knew the history of Western civilization, and they drew on its lessons as they launched their revolution for human freedom.

KEY TERMS

Freedom of conscience. Considered an inalienable right by the American Founders, freedom of conscience means the freedom to live by one's moral convictions in civic and political life. The decisive debates over religious liberty in 17th-century Europe were simultaneously an argument over the rights of conscience.

First Principles. The foundational ideas of freedom, equality, virtue, and government by consent of the governed, which motivated colonial Americans to fight for their independence from the English crown.

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

SOCRATES' DEFENSE IN PLATO, *THE APOLOGY*

[HTTPS://WWW.BRITANNICA.COM/BIOGRAPHY/SOCRATES/PLATOS-APOLOGY](https://www.britannica.com/biography/socrates/platos-apology)

NIALL FERGUSON, "WESTERN CIVILIZATION: A GOOD IDEA,"

[HTTPS://WWW.HOOVER.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/NF_WESTERN_CIVILIZATION.PDF](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/nf_western_civilization.pdf)



EPISODE 2

Two Revolutions for Freedom: 1776 v. 1789

Why did the American Revolution succeed, while the French Revolution collapsed into violence and tyranny? This episode of the First Principles film series explores the ideas and institutions that buttressed the American fight for freedom, including the role of faith in justifying and supporting the revolutionary cause.

KEY IDEAS

- In 1776 in Philadelphia, for the first time in history, a political revolution was launched proclaiming the natural equality and natural rights of every human being: universal rights that cannot be taken away, because these rights come from God, not the state.
- Inspired by works such as John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, the authors of the Declaration of Independence made their revolution the great enemy of human slavery and the great advocate of liberty.
- In 1789 in Paris, something went terribly wrong. Instead of delivering liberty, equality, and brotherhood, the revolution produced new forms of oppression, injustice, and misery. Instead of freedom, it cracked down on free speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion. The French Revolution collapsed into tyranny.
- Unlike the French, the Americans drew strength from Christianity, from the teachings of the Bible. In fact, next to the Declaration and the Constitution, the Bible might be called America's Third Founding document: For the American revolutionaries, it was the Freedom Book.
- The American Revolution succeeded because the moment of its birth brought together the right ideas, the right kind of institutions, and the right kind of people to lead them.

KEY TERMS

The French Revolution. The democratic revolution that toppled the long-established French monarchy. It began on July 14, 1789, when members of the French middle and lower classes stormed the Bastille prison in Paris. Inspired by the American Revolution, the French revolutionaries adopted the slogan “liberty, equality, and fraternity.”

The Magna Carta. A charter of English liberties granted by King George on June 15, 1215. The document embraced the idea that not even the king was above the rule of law. The Magna Carta became a basis for individual rights in the Anglo-American legal tradition.

The English Bill of Rights. A declaration of rights signed into law by English monarchs William III and Mary II in 1689 after the triumph of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Bill of Rights reaffirmed constitutional government, giving parliament authority over the king.

Two Treatises of Government. A 1689 political tract by English philosopher John Locke that refuted the concept of absolute monarchy and argued instead for the principle of government by consent. Locke insisted that all people had the right to rebel against any political authority that trampled their natural rights. The document greatly influenced the American revolutionaries in 1776.

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, 1776,
[HTTPS://WWW.ARCHIVES.GOV/FOUNDING-DOCS/DECLARATION-TRANSCRIPT](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript)

JOHN LOCKE, *TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT*
[HTTPS://WWW.GUTENBERG.ORG/FILES/7370/7370-H/7370-H.HTM](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm)

BERNARD BAILYN, “THE CONTAGION OF LIBERTY,” CHAPTER 6 OF *THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: BELKNAP PRESS, 1967).



EPISODE 3

Ordered Liberty: The Constitution

The Founders at Philadelphia attempted something that had never been tried before: to establish a democratic republic, based on the concepts of human freedom and human equality. This episode explains the remarkable achievement of the Founders in producing the most successful constitution in human history.

KEY IDEAS:

- In drafting a new constitution in 1787, the American Founders looked for political wisdom wherever they could find it. They studied the ancient Greeks, with whom the ideas of democracy originated. But direct democracy collapsed into tribalism and civil war: It was a tragedy to be avoided. The Founders also studied ancient Rome, which was a republic; it had a constitution in which the magistrates shared power with legislative assemblies. But by the time the Roman statesman Marcus Cicero arrived on the scene in the first century before Christ, the republic had degenerated into a corrupt empire.
- One divisive issue at the Constitutional Convention was the powers of the national government vs. the rights of the states. Most of the delegates were afraid of creating a central government that could assimilate and dominate the states. They created a federal system in which political power is divided: It is shared between the federal government and the states. They each have specific and limited powers, and the state governments, which are closer to the people, have preference. They remain “sovereign and independent states.”
- A second issue was the political punch of the states in the federal system. Delegates from more populous states wanted more influence in the Congress. Delegates from smaller states wanted equal representation. The Founders devised two chambers for the legislative branch. In the Senate, there is equal representation: two senators per state. In the House of Representatives, there is proportional representation, based on population. This “Great Compromise” gave everyone a stake in the success of the U.S. Constitution.

- The most difficult issue at the Convention was that of slavery. Everyone knew that if they tried to end slavery, the Southern states—which relied heavily on slave labor—would never ratify the Constitution. The country would be politically divided, with no constitution, no national government, primed for a foreign invasion. And so, the Founders evaded this great moral question—a decision that would haunt them, and the new country they founded.
- The Founders thought a great deal about the abuse of power and the problem of factions, groups focused only on their own narrow interests. The Founders’ solution was to create in the Constitution the separation of powers through the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary—each branch of government with its own set of powers, limited and clearly defined.
- The ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1788 is an astonishing achievement—a written Constitution to establish a democratic republic spread out over a vast territory. It was a new idea in the history of ideas—a political community not based on race, ethnicity, or religion, but on a set of beliefs, on a creed: the American creed, the belief in God-given human equality and human freedom.

KEY TERMS

Articles of Confederation. The first written constitution of the United States, drafted in 1777 during the Revolutionary War and ratified on March 1, 1781. Under the articles, the states remained sovereign and independent, with Congress functioning as the last resort to resolve disputes.

Constitutional Convention. The meeting of delegates from the 13 states in Philadelphia in 1787 to draft a new Constitution. Meeting from May until September, the delegates created a model of government based on a system of checks and balances, dividing the power and authority of the federal government among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Factions. Groups or political parties that zealously pursue their interests at the expense of constitutional principles. James Madison famously wrote that “[t]he latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man,” and argued that only a republican form of government offered an effective remedy.

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, *THE REPUBLIC AND THE LAWS*

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, JOHN JAY, AND JAMES MADISON, *THE FEDERALIST*
[HTTPS://GUIDES.LOC.GOV/FEDERALIST-PAPERS/FULL-TEXT](https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text)

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION, 1789,
[HTTPS://WWW.HERITAGE.ORG/CONSTITUTION](https://www.heritage.org/constitution)

THE BILL OF RIGHTS, 1789,
[HTTPS://WWW.ARCHIVES.GOV/FOUNDING-DOCS/BILL-OF-RIGHTS-TRANSCRIPT](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript)

JAMES MADISON, *MEMORIAL AND REMONSTRANCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENTS*, 1785, [HTTPS://BILLOFRIGHTSINSTITUTE.ORG/PRIMARY-SOURCES/MEMORIAL-AND-REMONSTRANCE](https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/memorial-and-remonstrance)

To learn more about
how to build an America
where freedom,
opportunity, prosperity,
and civil society flourish,
visit **heritage.org**.



214 Massachusetts Ave., NE | Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org