



# 3 Reasons to Be Proud of America

*By Dr. Burt Folsom*



*The United States is a unique country. No nation on earth has made the distinctive contributions that Americans have made to world civilization. For starters, here are three reasons to be proud to be an American.*

**1. The United States, from its creation, gave the gift of liberty to its citizens—and by this example showed the world a better way to live.**

Most nations begin their existence as a result of force or conquest, but America chose a different path. The U.S. became the first country in the world founded on an idea—the idea that people could govern themselves and prosper in an atmosphere of freedom.

In 1776, when the American colonies were under British rule, they declared their independence because their right to some self-government was being denied. “No taxation without representation” was their battle cry. And their persistence, more than their military strength, eventually wore down their British rulers.

The Declaration of Independence was crucial. Largely written by Thomas Jefferson, it has become the most famous statement of liberty in world history. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the Declaration announces, “that all men [women are included, too] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator [God] with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Before 1776, almost everyone was ruled by force—whether by a king, a tyrant, or a local strongman. But the Founders remarkably insisted that each of us is created by God with equal standing before him. “Thou shall not kill,” for example, gives everyone a right to life; “thou shall not steal” gives us a right to liberty and a right to “pursue” happiness.

The Declaration of Independence continues: “To secure these rights [life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness] governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In other words, governments are created to protect the “natural rights” God gave us to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No nation before America had ever asserted this idea.

After Americans won their war for independence, they wrote a Constitution that limited the power of government and stressed individual freedom. In this new Constitution, all American citizens had rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion; they had many other rights, including the right to due process of law and trial by jury. In 1788, the states voted for this new Constitution and elected George Washington as the first President. America’s unique experiment with liberty was under way.

## What About Slavery?

The Founders recognized that the existence in America of the institution of slavery contradicted the noble principles of liberty expressed in their Declaration of Independence. In fact, virtually all signers of the

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Declaration and the Constitution hated slavery, even those who owned slaves. Other U.S. slaveholders, however, disagreed.

This dispute made it impossible to abolish slavery and bind together the people in all thirteen states in a union. Therefore, the Founders compromised.

First, they never mentioned the word “slavery” in the Declaration or the Constitution. But they permitted it to exist, as a temporary measure, to hold all thirteen states together.

Second, the U.S. became the first nation in the history of the world to legally challenge slavery and ban it in large parts of the country. Before the U.S., slavery had legally existed in every civilization since the beginning of recorded history. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, defended it by saying some



George Washington, shown above at his farm in Mount Vernon, Virginia, in a lithograph after a painting by Junius Brutus Stearns, c. 1853, feared that if he freed his slaves, they would starve because they wouldn't be hired by plantation slaveowners in the South and conversely wouldn't have the necessary skills to compete with free blacks in the North. Washington's solution was to employ, feed, and shelter his slaves while he and his wife Martha were alive and free them with pensions after he and Martha died.

men are fit to rule and some are fit only to be slaves. Most nations in history accepted slavery. They understood that in warfare winners would often take the surviving losers as slaves.

Although some people in the world, especially in England, had criticized slavery, Americans were the first to do something about it. At the national level, Americans passed a law stating that slavery would not be allowed in the Northwest Territory, which included the future states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. And the Constitution enabled the U.S. to say no to importing more slaves into the country after 1808.

Third, the states took action. The U.S. was a nation of states, and states had the power to abolish slavery. By 1804, nine of the 17 states had legally limited slavery within their boundaries. Most of these nine states abolished slavery quickly. Other states passed laws to gradually free their



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not muster the votes to do so. Washington was hesitant to free his slaves right away because he knew that his free blacks, trained in plantation agriculture, would not be allowed to work with those still enslaved on other plantations. And if his freed slaves moved north, they lacked the training to compete in sailmaking, shoemaking, and other crafts common up north. In other words, Washington feared that if he freed his slaves, they would starve.

Washington’s solution was to employ, feed, and shelter his slaves while he and his wife Martha were alive and free them after he and Martha died. This he did and his estate paid out pensions to his newly freed slaves for more than 30 years. Others in slave states joined Washington and freed their slaves. Some states that permitted slavery—including Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina—allowed free blacks in their states to vote.

Even women made world history when New Jersey gave them the legal right to vote. New Jersey’s unprecedented action was, of course, consistent with the Declaration. As Alexander Hamilton said, “Natural liberty is a gift of the beneficent Creator to the whole human race.” The U.S., step by step, was on the road to freedom for all.

enslaved people. Once freed, many states allowed their liberated blacks to vote—something unprecedented in history.

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In Virginia, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson tried to persuade the Virginia legislature to abolish slavery, but they could



*The above mural painting by Emanuel Leutze, c. 1860, located at the United States Capitol, depicts the success of the American experiment in liberty and the most important reason for this success: Americans’ ability to build the country by “winning the peace” after gaining their independence.*

## Why Do Other Countries Fail?

Over the years, the astounding success of the American experiment in liberty encouraged about one hundred other colonies to declare their independence as well—mostly from European rulers. Many of these young countries modeled their new governments after the United States. But these new nations have not come close to America’s success. Why?

Just because some colonies win their independence does not mean they will win peace afterward. In fact, the scores of failed new nations tell a consistent story of outside rulers being overthrown and replaced by local

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Second, Americans displayed integrity and paid off their inevitable debts from their war for independence. In fact, America, during its first 50 years as a nation, paid off its entire national debt. That display of financial integrity attracted capital to America from leading investors all over the world.

Most other new nations, by contrast, repudiated either all or part of their war debt. Outside investors then shunned these nations. Without good credit, new nations end up impoverished. They have no leverage to borrow money and create jobs. Many new nations, because they refuse to practice financial integrity, plunge into bankruptcy and political instability.

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dictators. America stands almost alone as a colony that won its independence and then won the peace that followed.

Americans won the peace because they did two things. First, early American Presidents were so committed to liberty that they left office voluntarily if they were voted out. Dozens of new nations, however, from Mexico to Ghana, “elected” or installed men who claimed to value freedom but who refused to leave office—and then used the military to threaten their opponents.

## **2. Without America, and its inventors and entrepreneurs, the standard of living in the world would be a small fraction of what it is now.**

The American economy has been the wonder of the world. From air conditioning and microwave ovens to the internet and the iPhone, American entrepreneurs have transformed the world with their spectacular products.

How did it happen that America, with only four percent of the world’s population, transformed the standard of living for everyone else? There is nothing inherently special about being an American, but there is much that is special about living in a country that guarantees its citizens the “freedom to try.” The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution encourage Americans to “pursue happiness” and promises them, if they succeed, the government will not grab what they earn.

Before 1776, virtually every nation’s government could legally block its entrepreneurs or even confiscate their property. Think of it this way: if you know a king can take what you have created, what incentive do you have to

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create it? The answer to that question helps explain why economic progress in the world was so slow for so long.

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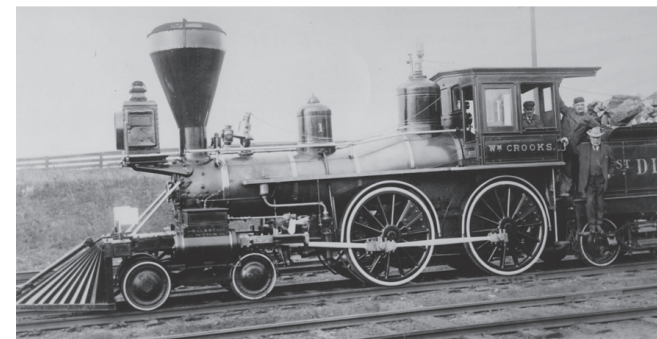
If we study the history of America’s remarkable economic growth, we surprisingly find that early in U.S. history, from 1789 through the Civil War in 1865, Americans were slow to trust their entrepreneurs and too reliant on government.

For example, an American invented the technology for steamships, a great advance in commercial transportation. But when the Europeans speeded up commerce by using steamships to cross the Atlantic Ocean, U.S. politicians responded by showering federal subsidies on favored shippers to compete with the Europeans. In spite of lavish federal aid, which added up to almost 20 percent of the national debt by 1860, these subsidized shippers failed. Finally, Cornelius Vanderbilt entered the competition and criss-crossed the Atlantic Ocean with no subsidy. He outperformed all other Americans and most of the Europeans as well.

Americans also invented the telegraph, a towering achievement in the history of communication. But American politicians barred entrepreneurs from building telegraph wires and competing. Instead, the government itself insisted on operating the telegraph and keeping the anticipated profits. But after a year of losing money, the government privatized the telegraph. As a result, entrepreneurs built thousands of miles of telegraph wire across the

nation and then laid telegraph wire on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to establish communication with Europe.

The last straw for trusting the government to spur the American economy was in the 1860s when Congress subsidized the Union Pacific Railroad to help cross the continent from Nebraska to California. After years of corruption, the Union Pacific went broke. Then James J. Hill, an immigrant, built the Great Northern Railroad, the finest transcontinental railroad in the country, from Minnesota to Washington with no federal aid. Americans at last learned their lesson.



*James J. Hill, president of the Great Northern Railroad, often personally supervised the construction of tracks. Here, Hill (with straw hat and beard) poses in 1908 on the engine of the train that he rode to oversee construction of tracks in Montana.*



*Railway route map from 1897 shows the Great Northern Railroad stretching from Minneapolis to Seattle, Vancouver, and Portland. The Great Northern route is indicated with the unbroken heavy line.*

## The Gilded Age

What followed was a period of U.S. history sometimes called “The Gilded Age,” from about 1865 to 1905, where entrepreneurs thrived and limited government prevailed. During these years, Americans decided they would either rise or fall as an economic power on the basis of its entrepreneurs competing in free markets. In fact, Congress even repealed the income tax in 1872 to prevent the next generation of politicians from undertaking more subsidy disasters.

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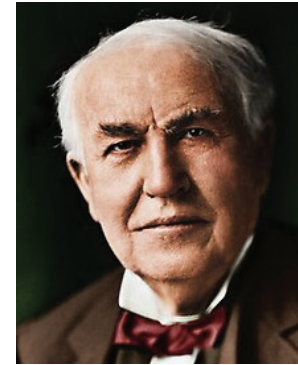
The result of this experiment in liberty during the Gilded Age was perhaps the greatest flood of spectacular inventions in human history. Let's start with four major American creations: the telephone, the typewriter, the adding machine, and the computer. All four inventions were somewhat interconnected and they soon transformed business and the

way the people of the world communicated. The computer, for example, was invented by Herman Hollerith. In his first project, he adapted technology from the typewriter and the adding machine to rapidly organize billions of pieces of information to complete the U.S. Census of 1890.

The greatest inventor of the Gilded Age, or maybe any age, was Thomas Edison. He harnessed electricity and lit up millions of homes; he also gave cheap electric power to the world. His later inventions of the phonograph and movie camera forever changed entertainment. His records and films brought the creative artists of the world before millions of Americans.

Finally, Americans of the Gilded Age popularized two of the most phenomenal inventions in world history: the car and the airplane. In the case of the car, Henry Ford did not invent it, but his assembly lines did put cheap Model T Fords in many millions of garages in the U.S. As for the airplane,

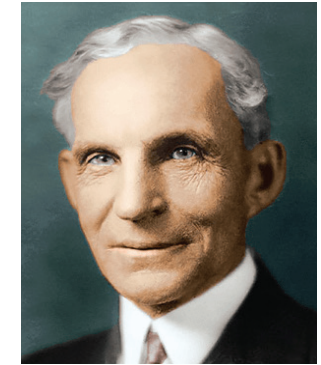
## Leading American Inventors of the Gilded Age and Their Inventions



**Thomas Edison**  
Harnessed electricity, inventor of the phonograph and movie camera



**Herman Hollerith**  
Inventor of the computer



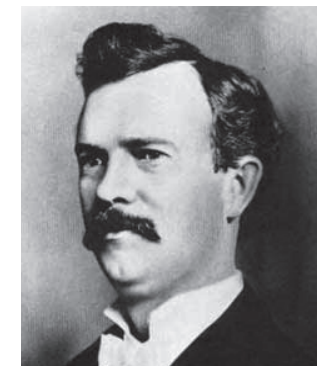
**Henry Ford**  
Innovated the moving assembly line to mass produce inexpensive cars



**Christopher Latham Sholes**  
Inventor of the typewriter



**Wilbur & Orville Wright**  
Inventors of the airplane



**William Seward Burroughs**  
Inventor of the adding machine

in the late 1800s, it was merely a futuristic dream. As late as October 1903, the *New York Times* declared that no airplane would be invented for perhaps another one million years. Later that year, however, the Wright brothers successfully flew the first airplane.

Students of history, who explore the dramatic impact of these sensational

inventions, are often startled to discover that neither the richest nor the best educated Americans were much involved. Henry Ford, for example, was an uneducated laborer who left the farm for Detroit at age 16. Orville and Wilbur Wright were bicycle mechanics who never went to college. Neither did Thomas Edison. These entrepreneurs were not men of means but men of ideas who had vision, who had perseverance, and who lived in a climate of liberty with incentives to experiment.

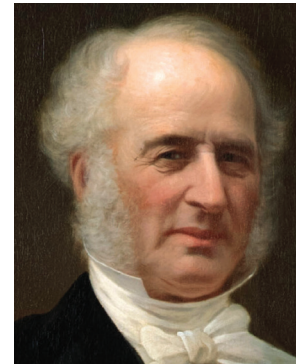
Limited government in the Gilded Age nudged entrepreneurs to take risks and also allowed America to record budget surpluses each year for 28 straight years. In fact, America almost wiped out its entire national debt. With such financial stability, immigrants flooded America. During some years in the Gilded Age, more than one million immigrants came to America to enjoy its freedom and seek better lives.

With government out of welfare, what happened to poor people? Most U.S. entrepreneurs were Christians who believed in using some of their wealth to help others less fortunate. Private charities flourished in America because people wanted people, not government, to help others.

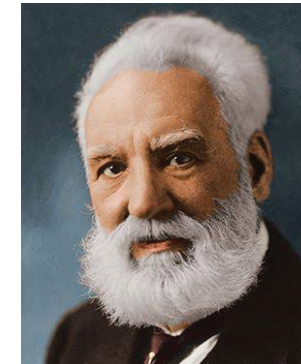
Few entrepreneurs went to college, but many—such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and Ezra Cornell—started new colleges. Steel producer Andrew Carnegie helped build libraries in thousands of cities so that poor Americans could learn free of charge. What's more, churches tackled poverty, American citizens started the Red Cross, and others built and ran orphanages.

Some entrepreneurs during the Gilded Age eagerly helped minorities. For example, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, started Galludet College for the deaf. Oil baron John D. Rockefeller, the first billionaire in U.S. history, gave more than half of his wealth to charity—that included the Tuskegee Institute for black men. He also founded Spelman College for black women. Dozens of other white entrepreneurs started black colleges to help train teachers. Those teachers, black and white, became legendary, and because of them black adult literacy skyrocketed from 19 to 84 percent from 1870 to 1930.

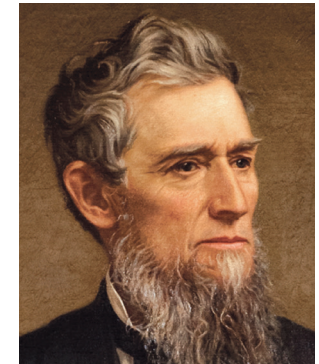
### *American Inventors and Entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age Who Used Their Wealth to Start Universities and Make Education Available to Minorities and the Disadvantaged*



**Cornelius Vanderbilt**  
Founder of Vanderbilt University



**Alexander Graham Bell**  
Founder of Galludet College,  
for the deaf



**Ezra Cornell**  
Founder of Cornell University



**Andrew Carnegie**  
Co-founder of Carnegie Mellon  
University and builder of libraries  
in thousands of American cities



**John D. Rockefeller**  
Founder of Spelman College, for  
black women, and major supporter  
of Tuskegee Institute, for black men

With the triumph of America's entrepreneurs in the Gilded Age, the U.S. became the financial center and supreme military power in the world. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result, would become the American century.



### 3. The U.S. saved Europe and much of the World after World War II.

American efforts to live peacefully in the world were thwarted by World War I and World War II, both of which began in Europe and eventually engulfed the United States. In both wars, U.S. military strength was decisive in victory. Afterward, U.S. financial strength was essential in the recovery of Europe.

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World War II, for example, was triggered in the 1930s by the aggression of Germany conquering various countries in central Europe. The Japanese also contributed to the atmosphere of war by seizing land from China and other parts of Asia. When Japan bombed Hawaii at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. entered World War II, joining the Allied Forces of Britain, France, and Russia.

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and its allies overpowered Germany and Japan, ending the war.

During that last year of the war, Europe was in shambles from day-and-night bombing and millions of deaths. Crops were destroyed and farm machinery was damaged from battles and troop movements. Who could plant or harvest crops with so many families uprooted, homeless, and hungry? Mass starvation in Europe was at hand.

Russia, as a winner in the war, extracted reparations from both Japan and Germany. From Japan, Russia seized massive amounts of industrial equipment from factories Japan had built in China. From Germany, the Russians wanted more. They started with a reparations bill of \$10 billion and then took more than that in industrial equipment, electrical technology,



Following World War II, hundreds of thousands of Americans sent the needy from allied and former enemy countries “CARE packages” which contained an assortment of essential food items. In the above photo, c. 1946, a German family, walking amidst the rubble of Berlin, takes home a CARE package.



airplanes, armaments, and even railroads, which Russians dismantled and shipped east to their own factories.

Russia's reparations from Germany—although excessive—paralleled a long tradition of winners in a war ransacking losers. After all, Germany extracted reparations from France after the Franco-Prussian War in 1871; Russia was simply doing the same to Germany after World War II.

What should America do? The Americans had a claim to compensation as well—from the Japanese and the Germans, who had started the war; and from our allies, who had received massive American loans and gifts.

Because America had fed, clothed, and armed its allies, as well as its own soldiers, the U.S. national debt in just four years had skyrocketed from almost \$50 billion to \$260 billion. Some economists wondered if this titanic debt hike would hinder U.S. recovery after the war. Should the Americans, like the Russians, restore its economy by forcing reparations from the losers and repayment of loans from the winners?

No! What the Americans did was noble, heroic, and unimaginably unique in the history of warfare.

First, the U.S. did not ask its allies to repay their immense loans.

Second, the U.S. plunged deeper in debt to give emergency food rations and other assistance to prevent homeless refugees of Europe from starving.

Third, and most remarkable, the U.S. gave emergency food and support to its enemies, including Germany and Japan, who had started the war that killed about 400,000 American soldiers.

With starvation at hand, America immediately sent food to Europe. Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister, observed that after the war "Europe was a "rubble heap [and] ... a breeding ground of pestilence and hate." Americans tried to restore hope.

From 1945 to 1948, the United States Congress voted to save the lives of desperate Europeans by sending them—mostly free of charge—about 10 to



15 million tons of wheat and corn each year.

Even that, however, was not enough. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of Americans, having already dug deep in their pockets to pay the high taxes to fund the war, now dug deeper to ship boxes of food—called CARE packages—to feed more homeless refugees. CARE packages cost \$150 a piece (in today's dollars), and each one included a variety of foods, soap, and a needle and thread.

Did all of this aid make a difference?

One estimate is that the food and supplies from the U.S. to Europe prevented 12 deaths per minute from 1945 to 1948.

But the U.S. was not done. Europeans needed to rebuild their economies to provide jobs for the surviving men and women to earn incomes. Therefore, in 1948, the U.S. signed into law the Marshall Plan, named for General George Marshall, who had become secretary of state.

In announcing the new U.S. aid, General Marshall promised Europe not only more food but also the capital to build new industries with jobs to help make Europeans self-sufficient. America's "purpose," Marshall said, "should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist."

Americans hoped that revived European economies, even if they competed against the U.S., would be better able to resist communist takeovers. The Cold War had begun. Russia's communist government had already enslaved many countries in eastern Europe, and the U.S. helped to keep the rest of Europe free.

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On April 3, 1948, U.S. President Harry Truman signed into law the Economic Cooperation Act. This was commonly known as the Marshall Plan and promised Europe not only more food but also the capital to build new industries with jobs to help make Europeans self-sufficient.

In funding the Marshall Plan, the U.S. had to hike its national debt by five percent. (Today, five percent of our national debt would be more than one trillion dollars.) But the end result was the economic revival of many European economies and the sharp decline of hunger and homelessness. Japan received special aid, too.

America's startling decision to go deeper in debt to save the lives of its enemies was generous, but was it wise? After all, well-fed enemies, with their economies restored, could break their pledges of peace and renew their war against America.

We have 75 years of history to analyze the results of America's unique generosity. What we have seen is a living demonstration of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He said, "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great" (Luke 6:35).

Germany and Japan were the two most militaristic nations in the world for

50 years before World War II. But not now. Since the war, they have lived in peace with their neighbors and the world around them. And for Americans, their "reward" indeed was "great." The U.S. not only experienced peace with former enemies but also spectacular economic growth in the following years—so great that it dwarfed the costs of feeding and reviving Europe.

## Conclusion

The three American achievements described here are spectacular. In fact, by these three examples of courage and benevolence, America has elevated the political, economic, and moral state of world civilization more than any other country on earth since 1776.

These American contributions—one from the 1700s, one from the 1800s, and one from the 1900s—are not the end of the story. What will be the next great American undertaking? Are you among the next generation of Americans with new ideas and the energy and grit to make it happen?

## Additional Resources

Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States* (2019)

Burton W. Folsom, Jr., *The Myth of the Robber Barons* (2018)

Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders* (1997)

Richard Brookhiser, *George Washington on Leadership* (2008)

Allen Matusow, *Farm Policies and Politics in the Truman Years* (1967)

Werner Keller, *East Minus West = Zero* (1962)

## About Dr. Burt Folsom

BURTON W. FOLSOM, JR. is distinguished fellow at Hillsdale College in Michigan. There he served as Charles Kline professor of history and management from 2003 to 2017. Folsom received his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Pittsburgh and has taught at the University of Nebraska, the University of Pittsburgh, Northwood University, and Murray State University. He has also been senior fellow at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan; and historian-in-residence at the Center for the American Idea in Houston, Texas.



Professor Folsom's first book was *Urban Capitalists* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981; second ed., University of Scranton Press, 2001). His later books include *Empire Builders* (Rhodes and Easton, 1998); *New Deal or Raw Deal?* (Simon & Schuster, 2008); *FDR Goes to War* (Simon & Schuster, 2011); *Uncle Sam Can't Count: A History of Failed Government Investments, from Beaver Pelts to Green Energy* (HarperCollins, 2014); and *Death on Hold* (Thomas Nelson, 2015). The last three books Folsom co-authored with his wife, Anita Folsom.

His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Southern History*, *Business History Review*, *Pacific Historical Review*, *Journal of American Studies*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, the *American Spectator*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He is a frequent guest on Fox News, where Neil Cavuto has said, "If you teach as well as you perform on air, you must be one fantastic professor."

## About Young America's Foundation

Young America's Foundation is the principal outreach organization of the Conservative Movement, committed to ensuring that increasing numbers of young Americans understand and are inspired by the ideas of individual freedom, a strong national defense, free enterprise, and traditional values.

We inspire millions of young people with conservative ideas through breakthrough conferences and seminars, campus lectures and activism initiatives, internships, and educational programs across the country—including the Reagan Ranch project, Reagan's Birthplace and Boyhood Home, the National Journalism Center, the Center for Entrepreneurship & Free Enterprise, and Young Americans for Freedom.

Young America's Foundation preserves Ronald Reagan's Rancho del Cielo in Santa Barbara, California; his boyhood home in Dixon, Illinois; and birthplace in Tampico, Illinois as premier Presidential properties and sites to inspire America's future leaders and teach the lessons of Ronald Reagan's Presidency.

The National Journalism Center trains students in the skills of accurate journalism and reporting through prestigious media internships and classroom training featuring leading journalists and experts.

Young Americans for Freedom chapters provide young conservatives with unmatched resources, training, and activism initiatives to advance freedom at schools nationwide.

Young America's Foundation's Center for Entrepreneurship & Free Enterprise educates and inspires young people to champion free enterprise principles.

To learn more about YAF's programs, please visit [YAF.org](http://YAF.org) or contact Young America's Foundation at 1-800-USA-1776.



“Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn’t pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same.”

— RONALD REAGAN



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